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Outbreak Company
13
THE POWER OF MOE

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Prologue

The whole place was bathed in sunset light, a stark red glow nearly the color of blood.

It was a color that spoke to a certain kind of ending. A liminal moment in which the day, full of brightness and the clamor of life, withered and gave way to night, with its consuming darkness and the silence of the grave. Many people found themselves all but paralyzed by the onset of those hours of darkness, which they viewed as fit only for sleep, that distant simulacrum of death.

But at this moment...

“Urgh.....”

It wasn’t yet full dark, but there was no sign of people anywhere. The languid light of sunset typically saw at least a few figures scurrying home amidst the lengthening shadows, but tonight, there was no one. No one walking, anyway.

“Hrrgh.....”

Instead, the path was full of people collapsed.

“Ahh... Oh...”

The brutal red glare shone on them as they grunted and groaned, sounds of agony from someplace beyond words. A traveler passing through would have wondered at the sight. It wasn’t famine, or plague; that much was obvious. The people weren’t emaciated enough for that, and anyway, such things wouldn’t have drawn—or driven—them outdoors.

Bandits, then, or perhaps a military attack? But the town was not burning, nor was there any sign of looting. There were some indications of struggle here and there in the earth and on the walls of the buildings, but no evidence that any outside interlopers had broken into the houses or the storage areas.

“Grrr... hrrgh...”

One man braced himself against a wall with his left arm, pulling himself to his feet. He seemed to be in excellent physical shape; maybe that was why he had recovered sooner than the others. But his right arm hung at

an unnatural angle, and his face and limbs were covered with bruises and scrapes. He even had what appeared to be burns. It was a terrible sight. If he had internal injuries, then it would be critical that he be treated immediately. But this man seemed to feel there was something more urgent than his wounds.

"It must... be sealed..." he gasped. A look of terror was on his face. "The cursed... a-armor... It turns humans into b-beasts... The horror! The horror... It's hardly... armor at all... What *is* it...?" But there was no one to answer his desperate question, and his words melted away in the scarlet light.

The man leaned against the side of the building as he took in the awful scene before him, and then he began to walk, almost dragging himself along.

"There..."

Ahead of him, far down the path, the town gate still stood open, yawning beneath the hateful twilight. Several dark figures stood there, the sun at their backs. They seemed almost human—but not. They each had a head, a body, and four limbs. But this basic humanoid shape only made the deviations all the more obvious, and all the more unsettling.

"Damnable... monsters... They must be sealed away..." And then, out of strength, the man slumped to the ground beside the wall. The awful forms before his eyes did not mock him, nor did they approach to strike a killing blow. There, awash in that light of all ending, the inhuman human forms labored away. To the man and his gasping breaths they paid no attention at all.

Chapter One: Look Who's Mr. Popular

"Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home"—those words are a complete fantasy. At least in my opinion.

And how often have people said "money makes the world go round"? There's even an expression, "poverty dulls the wit." Being poor isn't something to be ashamed of, but it's not a mark of honor, either. Since the moment the money-based economy came into being, there's probably been some standard below which a person is considered to be "poor." And being poor leaves them with fewer freedoms and fewer choices. Who *wouldn't* feel bleak in that situation? People are products of their environment. Its influence can't be ignored. That's just the way it is. So—

"Shinichi...sama..."

A girl in an apron called hesitantly to me from the kitchen.

Myusel Fourant. The most immediately striking thing about her used to be the maid uniform she wore, but these days it was much more common to see her in a patched-up old apron. She had sold her maid outfit ages ago.

"Dinner's ready..."

I thought she looked a little gaunt compared to when I'd first met her. She'd always had a slim build, but now she looked emaciated. She was a top-notch cook, but she never ate the best ingredients herself; she always gave them to me instead. Or at least, so I suspected, and that wouldn't be helping her physical state any. I knew I should be thankful for such a show of consideration, endlessly grateful in fact, but at the moment I just didn't have the wherewithal. In fact, coming from Myusel with her haggard look, I felt it almost as a rebuke to me, with my meager earnings. I was always afraid the unspoken message was, *If you weren't so worthless, I wouldn't have to work so hard.*

I glanced at the food on the plate Myusel held out to me and pulled a face. “Blech. Vegetable stir-fry again?”

There wasn’t even any meat in it.

“Y-Yes, sir, I’m very s-sorr—”

“Meat, goddammit, meat! Even some eggs! Can’t you scare something up *somehow*?”

“I’m very s—”

“Sorry! Yes, very sorry! You’re always *very sorry*! What are you, a broken record?” Overcome with frustration, I gave our cheap tea table a kick. Too light to withstand the blow, it flipped over, sending everything on top of it—the chopstick holders, spices, and teacups—scattering all over the unpleasantly fuzzy tatami mats. Myusel flinched at the crash of breaking ceramic, then her shoulders sagged.

“I’m very—”

“Ahh, forget it. Just get outta here, I’m sick of looking at you!”

“Y-Yes... sir...” Myusel, her shoulders hunched, set the plate on the floor, then retreated to the kitchen. In our situation, “get out of here” was a figurative expression; we only had one room, so when I yelled at her, Myusel would just go to the farthest corner of the kitchen and sit down, hugging her knees.

It was disgusting. Pathetic. Wretched. I reached for a bottle of cheap wine by the wall. The drinking was all that kept me going these days. Everything pissed me off. Everything sucked. Even the winter wind that worked its way through the crack in the wall sounded like it was laughing at me.

When I picked up the bottle, though, it felt light. It was already empty. That’s right. I’d drunk the whole thing the night before.

“Feh!” I grunted.

Our rickety door opened and in walked a small, silver-haired woman. “We are home!”

Petralka an Eldant III—a big, fancy name for someone who was now just Petralka. The whole “Empress” thing? Someone else took over the gig ages ago. Petralka had gone from absolute ruler of a nation to the cleaning lady at some dive bar. Even the tiara that used to sparkle in her hair, we’d had to hock long ago; now she had a cheap plastic hairband.

“Ah, Shinichi, Myusel, you needn’t wait. Go ahead and eat di—”

“The hell’s this, Petralka? Empty-handed?”

“Er?”

“Did I tell y’ to get some more damn alcohol or didn’t I?”

“Ah—” She put a hand to her mouth. Guess she’d forgotten. ’Course, I’d forgotten I even asked her, myself, until just that moment. “Y-Yes, but Shinichi...”

“Don’t you *but* me! When I tell you to buy some alcohol, you go and buy it!”

“But our money...”

“What’re y’ workin’ for if you ain’t making money?! Get an advance or something!”

“We... We have already borrowed through next month’s salary...”

“I don’t care if you have to borrow through next year!” I shouted. “Think what a man wants!”

Petralka looked at me fearfully. She used to be all high and mighty, but since she’d eloped with me, I hadn’t hesitated to use my fists to keep her in line when I had to, so she’d become a lot more willing to listen. And *still* there were times like this when she acted like a complete idiot. It must have been that cushy upbringing as a princess.

An imperial ruler and a commoner? Nobody would approve of a match like that. Especially not if they knew that the commoner was keeping his ex-maid lover around. Then it would go from opposition to “we’ve got to keep these two apart.” We knew that. That’s why we’d run away.

Yeah, we’d run. And run. Farther and farther north, until our pursuers finally gave up. We wound up in a little town in a far northern country, where Petralka and Myusel and I settled down; but of course, we were never going to have a normal life. We stumbled along, no jobs, my resentment building day by day. Eventually I started to speak harshly to Myusel and Petralka, then grew physically abusive with them.

Why didn’t they leave me? Maybe because even if they left, they no longer had anywhere to go. The fact that our pursuers had stopped chasing us was itself proof that everyone had finally given up on Petralka. As far as everyone who knew her was concerned, she—and probably I—were as good as dead.

So, nowhere to go. Nothing to do but stay here and wither.

With that vision haunting me, I’d started to drink, and to needle Petralka and Myusel. It was the only way I knew to help my miserable life go by.

I was the very image of the *make-inu*, the "defeated dog," the L-O-S-E-R.

Where? Where had I gone so wrong?

"Shinichi. W-We wish to speak with you about something..." Petralka said hesitantly.

"Yeah, what?"

"As... As it so happens, we are expecting..."

"Expecting what? A new Pachinko place by the station?"

"No, not that. Shinichi, you and we are going to have... are going to be..." Petralka looked at the ground. She was sitting formally in *seiza*, with her hands on her knees. "So we... we doubt how much longer we will be able to work..."

"You've got to be joking! We can't afford to feed a kid!"

"B-But don't you remember? We were unable to conceive for so long that we had given up... Surely this child is a gift from heaven, we must care for it."

"Gift, my ass!" I bellowed. "I don't need that kinda gift! I can barely afford to feed *myself*, and you come in here saying you're freaking pregnant?! Forget about this damn kid and go buy my alcohol!"

"Shinichi...!"

"You say that kid's gonna keep you from working? The hell he is! Do your damn job!"

"But if we w-work too hard, the child might—"

"Yeah? Let's hope so, maybe it'll save us the trouble."

"Shinichi!"

"Hell, I'll fix it right now. One good punch to the gut—" I stood up, but then it happened. "One good... Huh?"

I felt a supreme sense of dislocation. What was the handle of that knife doing, growing from my belly?

"Huh? Ah—ahh? Hagh..." I was too shaken to form words.

All Petralka could manage for her part was my name. "Shinichi...!"

Geez. What... What's with the face? You're the one who stabbed me. What the hell gives you the right to stab—

"Shinichi-sama..." No sooner had the words registered than I felt a piercing pain in my back.

Myusel. You too? But why...

"I can't do it... I can't stand it anymore. So... together, let's—"

“W... Wai—”

“I’ll follow you... anywhere.”

I somehow swung around in time to see Myusel, an unusually warm and gentle smile on her face. She pulled the knife out of me—then raised it over her head.

“Shinichi-sama...”

“Myus—”

The last thing I saw was the rusty blade heading for a point between my eyes.

“Geez, what is this, some kind of bad TV drama?!” I quipped with all my might as I woke up. I was drenched in sweat, and my heart was going a mile a minute.

I had never asked for such a realistic dream, but there it was. I even thought I could feel the tip of the knife between my eyebrows. At the same time, I didn’t feel any particular pain despite having been stabbed—I guess that’s dreaming for you.

“Urgh...” I hauled myself into a sitting position and let out a breath. That was the worst dream. It had practically been a stereotype of the dysfunctional family, yet the details were weirdly specific to my life. Even on television, you pretty much never saw a short tea table like that except on old slice-of-life shows like *Sa**e-san*. And the thing where a couple (okay, in my case, a trio, but never mind that) elopes and runs off to the far north, and one of them is a worthless lout who waves a bottle around and shouts a lot? It’s such a bunch of hoary clichés that it could practically be considered certified cultural heritage by now.

But then on the other hand, Myusel and Petralka had been there, and everything about them—the way they looked, sounded, and acted—was eerily true to life. So much so that I found myself thinking that if one of them really stabbed me, that’s probably how it would feel.

Believe me, it wasn’t pleasant. In particular, I really hated how disgustingly pathetic I had been in that dream. I mean, a guy like that was hardly even human anymore.

Or so it was easy to think, but I couldn’t guarantee that if I was driven out of my own life, I wouldn’t become like that. I didn’t have the

confidence in myself to say for sure it would never happen.

"Is everything all right, Shinichi-sama?"

"Yeah, I'm f—" I froze as I looked up: Myusel was standing there with a cleaver in one hand.

"Shinichi-sama?"

"Eeeeyaaagghhh!"

What—what the hell? Was I still dreaming?! Was this the bad ending, the one where I woke up from a nightmare only to discover I was in another nightmare, forever and ever?!

"What are you going to do with that? Are you going to stab me?! They're going to be out there going, 'We think the motive was an affair gone wrong,' even though I'm still a virgin! That's so wrong!"

"Er...?" Myusel blinked a few times. "Oh!" She noticed the knife in her hand and quickly hid it behind her back. "P-Pardon me. I heard you shouting, Shinichi-sama, so I came running—but I was right in the middle of making breakfast..."

So she had brought the knife with her. Unfortunately, knowing that didn't do much to slow my pounding heart. After a dream like that, I would have to be crazy *not* to freak out a little when I saw Myusel with a knife.

"If, ahem, if I may ask... *are* you okay?"

"Uh-huh, yeah, fine, I'm just fine. Doing great," I said, nodding vigorously. "Don't worry, Myusel, just... you can go back to your cooking..."

"Mm..." Myusel nodded, looking a little unsure, and then left the room. As I heard her footsteps recede from my bedroom door, I let out a sigh.

This seemed like all kinds of bad. I had an inkling of why I'd had that nightmare. The reason was happening at that very moment. Or rather, not happening. I had only just realized it, and things weren't moving forward. Things weren't getting resolved.

And what things were those? Well...

"Um..." The girl stood there holding a boxed lunch. "I, uh, made this for you... You can eat it. I mean, if you want."

The twin-tailed girl blushed and hid her eyes. Her eyebrows drooped timidly, yet the flush in her cheeks expressed her hope, her expectation. The

impression of innocence was complete, the knowledge that she had poured her heart and soul into this lunch inescapable. No man alive could have said no to her.

Or anyway, couldn't have, if she had been the only one standing there.

"Choose *my* lunch!" said a long-haired girl standing beside her. She squeezed forward, a bit aggressively, offering up a lunchbox. She seemed so confident that it was her creation that would be picked, it almost made her look somehow taller than the other girl. Yet there was just that hint of doubt, that lingering question, "But what if he doesn't choose me...?" behind her confidence, and that was sweet in its own way.

Aargh, they're both so cute!

How could I pick just one of them?! It was impossible!

""Which will you choose?!"" the girls chorused when they saw that I wasn't immediately making a decision.

What to do, what to do? Think of it like a multiple-choice question. The answers:

A. Eat Miu's lunchbox

B. Eat Ruka's lunchbox

.....

"Ummm..."

As I hesitated, the girls' voices came flying at me:

"Sensei, you *have* to pick Miu!"

"No, pick Ruka!"

"Miu's so devoted! You have to respond to her love!"

"The very thought that Ruka overcame her own clumsiness to make that lunch for you should set your heart on fire!"

"Miu is the MC's oldest friend—she's gone through everything with him, remember?! They share more memories than anyone!"

"But the MC is the first person who ever saw Ruka as just a girl! He's the only one for her!"

In the swarm of students surrounding me—well, what they were really surrounding was the laptop computer sitting in front of me—two in particular argued with special vehemence. One of them was standing to either side of me, and I felt very literally caught in the middle of their argument.

Standing to one side and leading the charge for the "pure-hearted best friend" Miu was a dwarf girl. She was, let's say, vertically challenged, in

the way these earth-and-metal-loving faerie-like people usually were, making her look young and sweet—but she was actually in her late teens, a forceful character who served as a sort of spokesperson for the other dwarf students. Her name was Romilda Guld.

On my other side, championing the "tsundere sweetheart" Ruka, was a slim elf boy. These wind-and-tree-loving faerie-like people of the forest were often tall and finely featured. It almost made him look like a girl sometimes—but he was in fact the son of a notable elvish household: a point of pride for him, and of course, something that made him an authority among the other elf students. His name was Loek Slayson.

Elves and dwarves. The fantasy demi-human races *par excellence*, renowned for, among other things, not getting along very well. It wasn't so much that there was some deep ancestral hatred between them, just that they had different lifestyles, and different opinions on a lot of subjects, and it was hard for them to agree about much of anything.

Here at my school, there were frequent disagreements between the elves and the dwarves, and Loek and Romilda were usually leading their respective factions. They could often be seen bickering with each other on behalf of their cohorts. That sort of thing had been going on for centuries, and I didn't expect it to change overnight. But I thought recently I'd been hearing just a little less about fights starting for fatuous reasons like "She's an elf, and I hate elves," or "He's just a dumb dwarf, that's the problem." If anything, there were increasingly more arguments about me, and about otaku stuff—anime and games and manga, and differences of opinion thereon.

Not to mention that when it came to Loek and Romilda... Well, for all the fighting, I also saw them together a lot. It was enough to make me think that maybe they were actually really close friends. Some say the more you fight, the closer you are, because you know you can say anything to each other.

Er, but getting back on subject.

""Sensei, which one will you choose?!"" Loek and Romilda both demanded. I turned my eyes to the laptop screen, more than a little worried. Two 2D women gazed back at me from the 13-inch LCD. Miu and Ruka. The screen, of course, was showing a gal game. Several other people in the classroom besides me had laptops of their own open, with the same game playing on each. It might look like we were just screwing around, but this

was an important lesson in real Japanese otaku culture. (No, seriously.)

"S-Sensei!" someone exclaimed. It wasn't Loek or Romilda, but one of the other students, someone playing the game on another computer. I looked over to them—they weren't an elf or a dwarf, but a human, and they were looking very conflicted. I wouldn't say *despondent*, but certainly like they didn't know what to do and needed some help.

"Something weird happened to my Affection with Ruka when I picked Miu's lunchbox!"

This got some excited murmuring from the other students.

"If you choose Ruka, Miu starts acting really strange!"

"Is this that thing? You know, a *yandere*?"

"I can't stand it, this feels like a lose-lose choice!"

"Sensei, what's the best strategy here?"

The student body, distraught and looking for guidance, turned to me.

"Er... well... I..."

Normally, I would have been able to answer them with confidence. Not to brag, but I've completed over a hundred gal games in my time, and have left many hundreds of women heartbroken in my wake. I'm a battle-hardened veteran of love (in two dimensions, anyway)! My vast experience allows me to evaluate a girl character's traits at a single glance, predict what will happen in a given scenario, and use the eye of my heart to discover the perfect strategy hiding behind the monitor. It should have been easy. But...

"Wellll..."

I was trying to buy time. Who should I pick? How was I supposed to know...?! To choose just one girl out of all those who loved you—what did that mean, but to abandon all the rest? To throw away the many possible happy, lovey-dovey futures that might have awaited you with them?! No—to dismiss the affections of a beautiful girl who cared about me—even if she was only two-dimensional... It was the height of caprice...!

Such a thing was repugnant! I couldn't! No, I just...!

"Sensei...?" The students were looking at me worriedly. But I just couldn't spit back an answer at them like I usually did.

Before I had anything to say to them, the bell rang for the end of class.

"Ahh....."

Literally saved by the bell. I stopped at the choice-select prompt and saved my game. I looked around at the students and tried to force a smile. "O-Okay, I guess that's it for now..."

It might have been class and the exercise might have been serious, but we were still playing a video game. The students were enjoying themselves too much to talk about anything else, even during break. So there was a lot of...

"Do you think you really have to choose one of them?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean maybe you could skip Miu *and* Ruka and go down the Mary route instead!"

"No matter how you cut it, Mary doesn't have as many flags as the other two, does she?"

"That's exactly why you should do it! Focus on Mary and you find out just how far this game can stretch."

"What if you focused on all the characters equally and built up a harem?"

"Ooh, that's a great idea!"

The students—okay, mostly the boys—were all chattering away about it. Humans, elves, and dwarves alike were passionate about the subject. Normally the sight of all of them having a lively conversation together would have brought a smile to my face, but today, somehow, it wasn't happening.

"All of the characters at once? What's wrong with you?" an elf girl demanded in exasperation.

"Yeah," a dwarf girl added. "That's basically the same as admitting that you're too flippy-floppy to choose anyone at all."

.....

Ow, th-that hurts! That hurts me right in the heart!

"There is no harem ending. This guy isn't a noble or anything."

"Trying to hang on to all those girls even though he's a worthless lout. What a monster."

"It would probably end up with him getting stabbed."

"Yeah, one of the heroines turns out to be a yandere."

.....

"Heeeeeeeeeeeek?!" I screamed without meaning to, drawing the attention of the entire classroom.

"Sensei...?" Boys and girls both were looking at me with concern. Their naïve, open faces were just that—they were only looking at me in surprise because I'd suddenly screamed. It didn't mean anything more than that,

nothing at all, and yet their conversation kept playing in my mind, looping like bad background music—or should I say, ricocheting around like a bullet, piercing me again and again.

Could it be that they were all just using the game as a cover to attack me? Maybe this place only *seemed* like a classroom, but it was secretly a place for class trials, and I was looking at a death sentence?

"Um, Sensei?" Romilda raised a hand and stepped forward as if to speak on behalf of the student body. To me, it looked like she was coming to make an arrest...

"I—I'm sorrrrryyy! Forgive meeeeeeeeee!"

"Sensei? What's the matter?" Loek sounded just as perplexed as Romilda when he saw me crouching on the floor with my hands over my head. But I didn't have the slightest capacity to respond to them. I just kept revisiting that morning's nightmare...

Meanwhile, the two of them started arguing.

"Romilda, what did you do to Sensei?"

"Me? I didn't do anything!"

The other students watched from a distance. Finally...

"Excuse me," someone said, coming into the classroom. "Shinichi-san, may I have a... moment...?" The voice trailed off, probably because the owner saw me clutching my head.

I looked up shakily to see someone with long black hair, an elaborate Gothic-Loli costume, and looks to rival the gorgeous dress. Ayasaki Hikaru-san. At first glance, ten out of ten people would have said this was a woman, but ten out of ten people would have been wrong. Hikaru was a guy who liked to dress up as a woman.

"What are you doing down there?" He came into the classroom, his black hair flowing behind him.

Loek answered for me. "We were playing this gal game in class, and all of a sudden..."

"A gal game?"

"Here, this one," another student said, indicating the computer screen, which was still showing the game. Specifically, still showing that impossible conundrum of which lunchbox to choose.

"Ah," Hikaru-san said with a glance at the screen. "Just leave him."

"Huh? But—"

"It's his own fault."

“Hyaaaarggh! Don’t... Don’t look at me like that!”

I had hoped Hikaru-san might rescue me, but instead he dealt the coup de grace, sending a fresh wave of agony through my heart.

The bell rang for the end of fourth period. In other words, the beginning of lunch break.

With class over, I booked it out of the classroom. I just... couldn’t quite stand being in there. I had set things up so we had four straight hours free to work through the gal game material. Those things take time to play, and we didn’t have anywhere near enough laptops to send each of the students home with one. Even if we did, they didn’t have electricity! The only solution was to play a portion of the game here at school.

As I’d sort of expected, the kids went wild for it, so much so that they were even “studying” it (by which I mean playing through it) on their own during breaks. Obviously, everyone couldn’t all play at once, so one student would work the controls while a gaggle of others looked on, with the natural result that the classroom overflowed with arguments about the game. *We should bump our Affection with Ruka. No, this is the branch that takes us to the Miu ending, we should take her on a date!* And so on and so forth.

For me, at that moment, listening to those debates was heart-rending. And that was what led to me practically fleeing the classroom.

“Sigh.....”

The moment I was out in the hallway, I let out a huge sigh. I wished I could find my past self, the one who had thought it was a good idea to do gal games in class, and beat him up.

“Rough morning, Shinichi-kun?”

In direct contrast to my bleak mood, the voice that called out to me was downright cheerful. I looked up to see a girl coming down the hallway. “Minori-san...”

She was giving me a sympathetic smile, her eyes narrowed behind her glasses. She had a baby face, still round like a child’s, but she was 100% a grown woman—a public servant, at that. The JSDF uniform she wore—let’s just say the chest was part of what screamed “adult!”

Koganuma Minori-san. A WAC (that’s a lady member of the military)

and Hikaru-san's and my bodyguard.

She came up to me. "Class as bad as all that?"

"Er... Well..." I found myself trailing off. It was just really hard to explain. If I said the wrong thing, I could end up pouring salt in my own wound. Especially when I pictured how Minori-san would react. But it turned out not to matter.

"Finally started to comprehend your situation, Shinichi-san?"

When had *he* gotten there? The shockingly good cross-dresser, Hikaru-san, showed up behind Minori-san, obviously enjoying himself. Actually, the way he was kind of peeking around from behind her was legitimately cute. I knew for a fact what he had between his legs, yet I still couldn't help feeling like a very weird door was about to open when I saw him. It made him someone to be reckoned with. The fact that he didn't seem the least bit, y'know, interested in men despite his outfits made the whole thing thoroughly confusing to me.

But back to our subject...

There was me, Kanou Shinichi.

The WAC, Koganuma Minori-san.

And my assistant, Ayasaki Hikaru-san.

The three of us were employees of Amutech, a so-called "general entertainment company" established to spread Japan's otaku culture here in the Holy Eldant Empire, a nation in another world. This school helped us disseminate that culture, and even teach some Japanese language, to the local children, in hopes of deepening the connections between our countries. (Okay, so it was originally intended to be the front line of a cultural invasion, but let's bracket that for now.)

And we were teachers at this school. Specifically, we introduced manga and anime and games and light novels to the young people of this world. Sort of like making learning fun, right? But because (for better or for worse) a lot of otaku stuff relies on certain clichés or stereotypes, you have to build up a body of knowledge before you can get the most out of it.

"So how's it feel, being the protagonist of a gal game?" Hikaru-san said gleefully.

"Lay off," I said with a frown.

This seemed to tip Minori-san off as to what I had been sighing about. But rather than comfort me, she saw fit to join Hikaru-san in his merriment.

"It must be rough being so popular, Shinichi-kun."

“I’m not p—”

Popular, I was going to say, but I stopped in midsentence.

Even I couldn’t completely ignore it. Two different girls were in love with me, or so it seemed. In Japan, it’s almost proverbial to say that everyone has a “moment in the sun”—we call it *moteki*, the time when a person becomes popular with the opposite sex. I had been well on track to becoming a wizard (by which I mean a thirty-year-old virgin), so I had no idea if this was the fabled time of my irresistibility to women, or if the entire thing was some big misunderstanding.

And by the way, both these girls were completely beautiful.

But me, I’d confessed my feelings to my oldest friend, convinced there was something there, and she’d shot me clean down because I was an otaku. So I had all but given up on the idea that some sweet, cute girl might like me. It had led, in fact, to me not just living but trumpeting my otaku lifestyle after I arrived here in Eldant.

And *now* I was suddenly popular? This had to be some sort of sick joke.

On top of that...

“Shinichi-sama!”

Suddenly, somebody called my name. And they didn’t address me as Sensei, or Shinichi-kun, or even Shinichi-san. No, they went the full *-sama*, and only a few people in this world called me that.

I jumped involuntarily, and slowly turned around. Coming down the hallway at a brisk trot was a lovely young woman wearing a one-piece dress perfect for going out.

“Myusel...?!”

At the sight of the flaxen-haired, twin-tailed beauty coming toward me, a sweet smile on her face, my heart went into turbo mode.

Myusel Fourant: the maid at my mansion and also a half-elf. And *also*, one of those two girls I mentioned who was in love with me. She’d picked up a fair amount of Japanese, so she sometimes taught at the school. I was pretty sure she hadn’t been scheduled to teach today, though.

“Y-Yeah, what’s up? I thought you weren’t teaching today.”

“No, sir. I’m not, but...” She came to a halt in front of me, her long eyelashes floating over her large, violet eyes, which looked demurely at the ground. “I thought you might like lunches. Minori-sama and Hikaru-sama, and...”

Myusel was carrying some kind of bag. I guessed there were bento

boxes inside. She glanced at Minori-san and Hikaru-san, then shyly, hesitantly, pausing to look down at the ground for an instant before looking back up, looked at me, a flush in her cheeks. “...And you, Shinichi-sama.”

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

No! Those eyes! That face! If you look at me like that, why I might—I might just take off!

My heart was pounding like it was playing a rhythm game that had suddenly launched into hard mode, *bam-bam-bam-bam-bam!* But I managed not to look away from Myusel.

Man, was she cute. I mean *cute*. Cute to beat the band. (It's so important, I said it three times.) Those big eyes. That flat nose. The soft-looking cheeks, delicate lips, and the perfect contours of her figure, which was rounded exactly where it needed to be even though she was so slim. All of it just perfect.

Now, of course, all those great looks would be for nothing if she turned out to have a terrible personality—but thankfully, Myusel's heart was every bit as good as the rest of her. She lacked a certain confidence on account of being a half-elf—but she was refined, thoughtful to everyone, yet surprisingly stalwart when the moment called for it...!

How could someone be so totally freaking perfect?!

And more to the point, how could a girl like that care about a guy like me? I mean seriously be interested in him as a member of the opposite sex?! I just didn't know what to do with that information. It wasn't like I could just be like, "Well, all right then!", run into the bedroom with her, and shove her down. But we *were* living in the same house, which made the idea of going on dates or exchanging diaries seem kind of weird. And in this particular alternate world, I could hardly invite her out to the movies.

I completely lacked what you might call "experience points" in this area, leaving me totally unable to respond.

"Thanks, Myusel." Seeing that I was too frozen with self-consciousness to react, Minori-san answered instead, smiling.

"Seeing as she went to all this effort, let's all eat together," Hikaru-san added, then looked at me with what I thought was a nasty grin. He could probably barely contain his amusement at how freaked out I was. For a while there I had been under the impression that I'd managed to make an ally out of an enemy, but now I was starting to wonder if maybe Hikaru-san was just fundamentally sort of a black-hearted person.

"You join us too, Myusel," he said. "I'm sure if we each give a little of our lunch, we can scrape together enough for one more. How about it?"

"Wha? Oh, all right." Myusel nodded happily. We were just about to go

find somewhere to eat when—

"Shinichi!" a high-pitched female voice called out, and I froze again.

That voice... I... I know that voice...!

"Oh! It's Her Majesty," Minori-san mumbled.

I didn't want to turn around—no, I didn't, but neither could I not, and so with my head full of a *crea-a-a-a-a-k* like a rusty robot standing up, I slowly looked behind me.

"Petralka..." I said, but my voice came out as something of a groan. Followed—or rather, scrambled after—by her knight-bodyguards, a diminutive girl with long, silver hair made a beeline for us. This was Petralka an Eldant III, Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire, where we were now living—in other words, the highest power and absolute monarch. She was adorable to look at; if someone told you she was in elementary school, you might believe them. Her features were as sweet as an angel's, holding the promise of true beauty in the future. "Wh-What are you doing here...?!"

That is, why had Her Majesty the Empress, the single most important person in this entire nation, left her castle and come all the way here? Yes, I knew how interested she was in otaku culture, and that she used to come to the school all the time, but after a nasty run-in with a group called the Assembly of Patriots when she had been taken captive, the people around her had been a lot more touchy about when she got to go out.

"Are you surprised?" she asked as she put a hand on me, smiling.

"What else would I be?!" I yelped, almost in tears.

What was going on here? Of all the days for both of them to walk into my school at the same time, the day after that nightmare was almost more than my heart could stand.

"We came in order to deliver this."

"Huh...?"

I blinked as she puffed out her chest (tragically flat, but that's a mark of status, too!) and chuckled in satisfaction. Despite her claim that she was "delivering this," there was nothing in her hands. Could it be that this was —you know? "*I'm* the delivery!" or whatever?

I was just starting to sweat when Petralka stuck her hand out to one side. One of the knights approached from behind and respectfully passed her a wicker basket.

"*Huh*...?!" In contrast to Petralka's self-confidence, my own response sounded even stupider.

A packed lunch? From Petralka, to... me?

Petralka was an actual empress. I didn't think going out of her way to give someone a lunch she prepared herself was something empresses normally did. Typically, it was other people who made food for *them*. Anyway, she'd certainly never done this before now. So why the sudden burst of... lunchiness?

Wait, this can't be...

"We have prepared this especially for you, Shinichi. You are welcome and encouraged to sob with joy."

"I'm sorry, uh...?" My eyes flitted toward Myusel, who was still standing beside me. She was clutching the lunch she had brought to her chest.

"Now, quickly..... Hrm?" Petralka followed my glance over to Myusel. She blinked, seeming to register for the first time that Myusel was there (actually, she probably *was* just noticing her), and then she took in the bundle the maid was holding.

The next instant, one of her finely-formed eyebrows arched in displeasure. Neither of them said anything for what felt like a long moment. There was Petralka, obviously not amused. Myusel took a half-step back under the ruler's steely gaze, but then she seemed to think better of it and looked the empress directly in the eye.

U-Um...? G-Girls, am I *the reason you're staring at each other so hard? Perchance? I'm assuming it's just my imagination that makes it look like sparks are flying between you two. Maybe I'm getting tired.*

I groaned a little, feeling a waterfall of sweat on my back. I didn't know exactly why, but this seemed bad. Real bad. Actually, I was gripped by an overwhelming sense of déjà vu. Surely it was just a sort of trick of the light that seemed to cause a choice prompt to float in front of my eyes:

A. Eat Myusel's lunchbox

B. Eat Petralka's lunchbox

Long pause.

Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!

"Uh, um..." I could hardly form words.

I felt two hands slap my back. One on my right shoulder, one on my left. I looked back to find Hikaru-san and Minori-san standing there.

"It must be hard, being so popular!"

"No... I'm not..."

“Not what? A popular guy? Could’ve fooled me.”

“.....rk.”

Darn, these two weren’t going to be any help—in fact, they were clearly going to make full use of this opportunity to make my life miserable!

So there we stood, me and my quote-unquote “friends,” facing Myusel and Petralka, each holding a lunchbox. You could have cut the tension with a knife.

My name is Kanou Shinichi. I’m the general manager of Amutech, and it’s my job to spread Japanese otaku culture here in the fantasy land known as the Holy Eldant Empire.

The world is a tricky place, let me tell you. One minute a guy (namely me) is living cocooned in his room, and the next he’s running an interdimensional cultural-promotion agency. All of it made possible by some truly crazy stuff about Japan discovering a “hole,” a portal to another world, that connected to the Eldant Empire. Not to *mention* that it started out as a devious ploy by the Japanese government to instigate a cultural invasion by means of—you know what? You’ve probably got this part already.

Anyway. Let’s just say some very surprising things can happen in life. Things you would have sworn were impossible, or just laughed off, until bam, there they are. For example, a run-of-the-mill otaku having two gorgeous women who looked like they jumped straight out of two dimensions both fall in love with him. That sort of thing can happen, did you know that? And when you find yourself dropped into what feels like a plot line from a manga or a light novel or something, believe me, it’s not easy to know what to do.

It started not long ago, when a certain Prince Rubert of the Kingdom of Zwelberich, an ally of Eldant’s, proposed marriage to Empress Petralka. In a world with what amounted to Middle-Ages values, getting married in your teens wasn’t unusual. In fact, if you went unwed into your twenties, people might start to talk. So in principle, there was nothing the least bit surprising about Petralka receiving a marriage proposal.

The catch was that Prince Rubert had a variety of ulterior motives, with

the ultimate result that he and his proposal got kicked to the curb. But it seemed to get Petralka thinking, and maybe even to change her mind about a few things.

"We will not brook your overtaking us while we take our time to think, Myusel."

That was something she'd said directly to my maid, and for her part Myusel, who always used to simply cower before the empress, had replied, "Understood, Your Majesty," in a tone that said "challenge accepted." At the time I'd been completely flummoxed, but through lengthy discussions with Minori-san and Hikaru-san, I had come to understand that the challenge in question was which of them would be the first to shoot an arrow through the heart of Kanou Shinichi.

Well, I say "had come to understand," but maybe "had been made to understand" would be more accurate. Sigh.

Yes, that's right: I had finally been confronted with the reality that these two women, Myusel and Petralka, were in love with me. Not that either of them had specifically told me so to my face—and I wasn't about to be all, "So, d'you love me? Is this L-O-V-E? *Ai*, *amour*, *amore*?" I was floored just thinking about it.

But speaking of thinking about it, when I looked back over our time together, I had to admit there had been some signs. It was just that, well... For a guy whose years without a girlfriend were exactly equal to his lifespan, a guy who would happily answer "anime, manga, and light novels" when asked about his hobbies—for a guy like that to suddenly be downright popular was just something I had never imagined.

For that matter, the whole reason I'd become a shut-in in the first place was because, when I had dared to confess my love for a childhood friend, she'd shot me straight down, citing the fact that I was an otaku. Never wanting to experience that kind of humiliation ever again, I'd vowed to myself not to make any assumptions about anyone, ever; reminded myself again and again that an excess of self-consciousness was the root of all embarrassment; and generally set myself up to be oblivious to the way these girls felt about me.

And yet eventually the fact got through even to me. Oh yes, it did. And once it had, I was left with the need to respond to their feelings in some way, but...

“Shinichi, which do you choose?!”

There we were in the schoolyard, where I was sitting on a bench with Petralka’s face very close to mine. She was really, seriously cute—and not just cute, I mean she was genuinely beautiful, delicate as a doll (in the best way), with a face that never flinched.

And right at this moment, she was so close that I could feel her breathing on me. How could my heart *not* be pounding? It couldn’t not! (Double negative.)

Of course, this wasn’t the first time our faces had been this close, but those other times, I hadn’t been thinking about love and romance and whatever else, so my only reaction had been “*Aw man, Petralka’s so cute!*” and heedless moe-ing.

Now? Now I couldn’t get away with that.

To add to my troubles, I felt a tug on my sleeve from the other side, the one not occupied by Petralka. I reflexively looked over—and discovered Myusel standing there with her face red, her eyes down, and a firm grip on my shirt. She didn’t say anything. She didn’t have to. Those pale fingers clasping the fabric of my shirt practically cried out, *Pick me!*, sending my heart into overdrive, *bmbmbmbmbmbmbm*. It seemed like only a matter of time until my heart rate went over 300. (At which point I would die.)

Arrgh... What am I going to do?!

Obviously, a part of me was happy to be sandwiched between two young women. A much bigger part of me felt virtually crushed under the weight. I mean, I’d never been asked to choose between two such beautiful girls before! Sure, I’d done it a few times in the worlds of gal games. I tended to start out by going the main-heroine route, and then trying out the secondary girl later. Always saving before any crucial choices, of course.

That’s a thing you can do in games. But the situation I was facing now was no game. There would be no do-overs. And if I screwed it up—well, worst-case scenario, I could end up like my nightmare from this morning, or with my decapitated head in a sack, or my beautiful boat being shown on television.

“So, what are you going to do, Shinichi-kun?” From another bench just behind the one on which I sat frozen between Myusel and Petralka, Minori-san was looking at me with a pained smile. Beside her was Hikaru-san, who wasn’t even trying to hide his schadenfreude.

“Better make up your mind quick.”

“Y-Yeah, but...”

Behind *them*, incidentally, stood Petralka’s bodyguards. Full armor, swords, the works—just standing there silently, looking intimidating. In fact, the silence was a big part of the intimidation.

The reality was that nobody dared to come into the courtyard while we were there. One look from those knights was enough to keep anyone from thoughtlessly getting too close to the empress.

“Urrrgh,” I gurgled.

“Better pick *somebody’s* lunchbox, or lunch break will be over before you can eat it,” Minori-san advised, scarfing down her own packed lunch.

Some advice. The only lunches Minori-san or Hikaru-san had were the ones Myusel had made for them, so they didn’t have to make any choice at all. No doubt, no hesitation!

“Minori is right! Decide quickly, Shinichi!” Petralka was insistent now, gesturing with her boxed lunch in front of my face. A boxed lunch hand-made by an empress.

“Shi... Shinichi-sama...” The sight of Petralka was enough to set Myusel back on her heels, but she still managed to hold up the lunch she had been keeping on her knees.

Ahhhhhhhhh!

I was caught between a rock and a hard place! Between the devil and the deep blue sea! Between a tiger at the front door and a wolf at the back! The point is, I had to choose between one of two things, and either of them would obviously lead to a bad ending! That was the nature of my situation. This “game” was impossible!

A long moment passed.

No... wait. Wait just a second, Kanou Shinichi. They say despair is the haven of fools. Think! Don’t get tunnel vision. Sometimes there are secret codes, or sometimes you get more choices if you fulfill certain conditions.

Maybe there was a third option.

“I... uh, I’ll take both. Happily,” I said, keenly aware of how forced my smile looked.

Long pause from Petralka.

Long pause from Myusel.

Painful looks from Minori-san and Hikaru-san as they chowed down on their lunches. Hikaru-san especially: he didn’t say anything, but I saw him take a sip of tea and then mouth, “*Looooser.*”

But what else was I supposed to dooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo?!

This was the only answer that would save me from hurting either Myusel or Petralka!

"Y'know, they... they b-both look so good." I took both of the boxed lunches from the girls and set them on my knees.

Gotta be honest, there was no actual way for me to know whether they looked good or not with the lids still on, but neither Petralka nor Myusel mentioned that. Maybe they were both too nervous.

Another pause.

Okay, start with Myusel's lunch.

I opened the lid and there, as was pretty much normal by now, was an ideal packed lunch. I'm not even really sure what that means, but the stuff in there was totally bento-ish. Full of soft colors, the appearance was like the way a traditional Japanese bento box would be drawn in a manga or something. There were some meatball(-like thing)s, some tiny tomato(-like vegetable)s. Even perfectly formed rice balls lined up in a neat row.

I had a thought...

"Myusel, did you base this on anything?"

"Well, yes..." Myusel smiled, her face flushing. "I asked Minori-sama and Hikaru-sama... what would normally be in a Ja-panese 'bento.'"

In other words, she went out of her way to make something that would be familiar and enjoyable for me. This wasn't the first time Myusel had consulted with Minori-san about Japanese food, or tried to imitate it using similar ingredients from this world or even tapping Minori-san's JSDF connections to import ingredients from Japan. But this time she had outdone herself. The little wiener had even been cut to look like an octopus!

Where did she get those wieners, anyway? She must have had them brought from Japan.

My thoughts were interrupted by Petralka, who said, "And wh-what about the 'bento' that *we* brought, Shi-Shinichi?"

I quickly opened the lid of her lunchbox, too.

"Ooh!"

This one was—what's the best word? Fresh and original. I ate Myusel's cooking every day, so I had a pretty good idea of how it would taste. It was comforting and familiar. But on some level, that's another way of saying it wasn't very surprising anymore.

For one thing, Petralka's lunchbox was a riot of color. It included dishes I had never seen, and it had a certain elegance—almost like it wasn't a lunchbox at all. Finely chopped vegetables, delicate sauces, careful, arcing lines everywhere—it looked like a French meal transplanted wholesale into a Japanese bento box. What was this unbelievably fancy vibe I was getting...?!

Maybe I should have expected as much from an empress. Honestly, though, I practically felt bad eating it.

"You didn't make this, like, *yourself* yourself, right?" I said. I didn't mean to say it. I just couldn't imagine Petralka preparing all this by hand. She must have had professional help.

"But—But of course we did." Petralka pursed her lips—*ahh, Your Majesty! You are simply too adorable!*

"Huh? So you mean... *you* did *this*, Petralka? Chopped the vegetables and everything?

"Er, no, well—" Petralka trailed off.

"And you were the one who grilled this thing over here? Look at the scorch marks on it, they're perfect! And the way this sauce is drizzled over this thing is downright artistic."

"Y...Yes, well... That... Ahem. We... We put it in the box."

Uh... I don't think that counts as making *a lunch.*

I managed to swallow the quip before it came out of my mouth. Look, everyone has strengths and weaknesses. Honestly, even if Petralka's contribution had been at the level of a kid helping a parent in the kitchen, she had still gotten this boxed lunch ready for me and brought it all the way here, and nothing changed that. I might question her methods, but never her feelings for me. Those feelings by themselves were enough to make me kind of happy but also kind of embarrassed but also send my heart straight into overdrive.

"In any event, be quick and partake of it."

"S-Sure."

Petralka handed me a fork she had at the ready, and just as she ordered me, I dug in. I started with one of the side dishes in Myusel's lunch. I tried to really *taste* it. It had that special savor she was so good at, the gentle burst of flavor I had imagined. She said she had first learned to cook back when she was in the military, so you might have expected her to specialize in things that would really stick to your ribs, and not to have a very fine

touch for spices—but I guess that was where her personality shone through.

I took a sip of tea to sort of "reset" my tongue, then try to bite Petralka's meal.

Oooh.

Talk about a rich taste without (etc.)...

It was so good, it practically had me quoting from a certain "gourmet" manga. Actually, though, the flavor was sort of at a tangent to what I'd expected. Most times, you could get a sense of how something was going to taste from the color and the smell, but here those things seemed almost completely disconnected; you truly had to taste it with your own tongue. I guess that's what comes of not actually having any experience with fancy food: the first bite is like a revelation.

And what a revelation! The flavor...!

Both of them were...

"Absolutely delicious," I concluded, looking at the girls in turn. This, at least, was absolutely the truth. Myusel's lunch, as I said, lacked the surprise of Petralka's, but it was profoundly comforting and pleasant. Petralka's food, in contrast, left me eager to discover what flavor I would encounter next with every bite.

"I'm so glad to hear that!" Myusel smiled happily, letting out a breath of relief. Like a true "warm-and-fuzzy" character, her smile was infectious, and soon I was grinning, too.

About an instant later, though, I found my warm, smiley dream interrupted when somebody grabbed me by the collar.

"*Which*?" Petralka demanded, raising an eyebrow.

"Er...?" I said.

"*Which* lunch is absolutely delicious?"

"Well, both, of course..."

"Which is *more* delicious?"

"Uh... W-Well..." I thought I had managed to avoid the worst by eating from both lunches, but now I had to rank them?! "Wellll..." I glanced away from Petralka's intense stare as if in hopes of escape, but I only found myself looking into the expectant eyes of Myusel. "Hrk...?" She was looking at me almost as intently as Petralka. Her gaze was one of supplication, of creeping self-doubt as she waited for my answer.

Ahhhhh, she's so cute, but no, this isn't the time!

I was starting to panic. I wasn't sure how long I could hold it together. I

had to come up with an answer, fast. But ranking one above the other was virtually impossible—I just wanted to enjoy the flavors—and above all, I didn't want to say something that would hurt Myusel or Petralka.

"I c-can't compare them," I finally managed. "I mean, it'd be like comparing apples to oranges!"

"Apples to oranges?"

"But I didn't use any Ja-panese fruits..." Myusel fretted.

It was a figure of speech!

Okay, no time for a comedy routine. Having found my way out, I couldn't permit myself to get sidetracked with quipping. I decided that going full restaurant-reviewer was the best plan.

"This one here, it's fluffy and melts in your mouth! I have to imagine that eating a cloud would be just like this! But this one over here, you can really feel it when you bite down, and the taste lingers on the palate! Yet the flavor is never overbearing or tiring! How can one of these possibly rank above the other?!"

I was trying to distract them, but I wasn't lying. Still—and maybe I should have expected this—neither Myusel nor Petralka looked really happy with my answer. Fair enough. I was being honest, though—I couldn't say one of these was number one, and the other second-best. I was just starting to feel so apologetic I thought I might drown when—

"Now that you've brought him lunches, you know what the next stage is." Hikaru-san sounded nonchalant, but he had a broad smile on his face.

Oh, the bad feelings this inspires in me!

"Better say *ahh*, Shinichi-san."

"Hrk...?!"

Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa, hold on! We were way beyond pouring oil on a fire—he was practically throwing rocket fuel on there! And I had been trying so hard to get *out* of this situation! What an ambush! What skulduggery!

"Say *ahh*?" Myusel said.

"Is it some form of intimidation?" Petralka asked, cocking her head.

Er, no, Your Majesty. You're thinking of how thugs and crime bosses greet people. The important thing is to tilt the head down a little and rake the other person with your gaze.

Okay, something else this isn't the time for.

"I mean you have to feed it to him. 'Open your mouth and say *ahh*,'

that's what I'm talking about. When a girl brings a guy a lunch, that's what she always does. It's an ironclad rule. Am I right, Minori-san?"

"You sure are. Happens every time."

Hikaru-san and Minori-san looked at each other. They were obviously, unmistakably, truly enjoying this. Was it possible they both secretly kind of hated me...? I could sort of understand why! Believe me, I could! But I wished they would stop jerking me around at times like this! I was so desperate not to hurt Myusel or Petralka!

But these cries from my heart went unheard.

"Indeed!" Petralka said, and then she snatched the fork from my hand and stabbed a random item from the lunchbox. It was a piece of meat. The meal might have been French, but someone had been thinking ahead enough to make sure everything was cut down to bite-size. Petralka brought it to my mouth. "A most useful lesson. Here now, Shinichi, you will... say *ahh*."

"Er, um, uhh..."

"U-Um, Shinichi-sama..."

While I dithered, Myusel, eager not to be outdone by Petralka, likewise grabbed a bit of food from her lunchbox on a fork and pushed it toward my mouth. The two bites of food were practically pressed up against my lips before I could open my mouth, urging me on. If my lips had been even the slightest bit open, I think the girls would have shoved both bites of food straight down my throat.

"Uh, okay, w-wai—hrmf!" I wanted to urge them to calm down, but the moment I opened my mouth, I found food in it from two directions at once. I almost literally choked on my words. I somehow managed to chew and swallow, hoping I could then resume trying to talk them down, but I didn't have the chance: one bit of bento after another was crammed into my mouth.

"Mrgh! Mrrfgh!"

"How about that, Myusel? We have made Shinichi *ahh* for far more of our food!"

"O-Oh, no... I w-won't let you beat me...!"

"Mrrrghhh!"

I couldn't even beg them to stop anymore—my mouth was so full of food it could practically have qualified as a bento box itself. There was way too much for me to appreciate any distinct flavors or textures. Anyway, this

wasn't even "saying *ahh*" anymore! I couldn't open my mouth far enough to say it!

"Mrfgh!"

At this rate, it's going to end up in my throat and I'm gonna choke! Argh! My throat! My throat! (Diary ends here.)

...Okay, enough cosmic horror.

"How delightful."

"Yes, wonderful.

I reached out to Hikaru-san and Minori-san, my hand trembling with agony, but they only stood there smiling beatifically.

C-Curse you booooth...!

"Come, Shinichi, eat more."

"Shinichi-sama, here, have some of this..."

And so it went. This continued until Minori-san, having savored enough of my suffering, clapped her hands and said, "We'd better get back."

"Ahhhhhhh..."

Back at the mansion, I was in my office, cradling my head in my hands. After the incident with the lunchboxes, Petralka, still not looking entirely convinced, had gone back to the castle with her guards. Which lunch had been more delicious, or for that matter which one had ended up filling the most of my mouth as I said "*ahhh*," remained inconclusive. Petralka seemed prickly about it, but Myusel looked downright relieved.

"What am I going to do?" I asked myself. "What am I going to *do*?"

As General Manager of Amutech, I had a mountain of work to get done, but I just couldn't seem to focus on any of it. My brain was too full of Myusel and Petralka. Their smiling faces kept floating in my mind's eye and wouldn't go away.

Both of them, allegedly, were in love with me. And that made me happy. I mean, really. If just one of them had confessed to me, I probably would have spun around from sheer happiness so fast that I would have bored into the earth like an industrial drilling machine.

But *both* of them? I could pray to God or Godzilla, and still not have an answer. I could be Akira or Agira, and never have the power to solve this

problem. Speaking of which, I feel like as capsule monsters go, Agira was way less well-known than Windom or Miclas. I wonder why that was. I mean, I readily acknowledge how cool Windom was, but—

No! Focus!

What was I supposed to do? Pick one of them and say "Sorry, better luck next time!" to the other one? Was I even capable of that?! I, who was absolutely, totally ordinary in every way other than my inveterate otakuism? Was I supposed to shoot down either Myusel or Petralka—beautiful women like them?! I had an embarrassment of riches here, and I was supposed to throw some of them away? Wouldn't the Waste-Not Ghost come and get me?

"Urrrgh..." I slumped over on my desk, too tired even to fret any more. The mental fatigue didn't help, but I wasn't exactly feeling my best physically, either. I felt like the food from that afternoon was still trapped in my stomach, just sitting there. Petralka and Myusel both seemed to have made an inordinate amount of lunch. A full stomach is an important part of happiness, but after a point, you go from full to overstuffed, and that's no fun.

"God, what am I going to do..."

Me, I just wanted time to think, but it looked like Petralka and Myusel both were suddenly in some kind of hurry. I didn't think they were going to cut me a lot of slack.

Myusel? Petralka? Or—and I thought the chances of this were very slim indeed—maybe neither of them? Those were my only choices at the moment. I guess I also had the option of exclaiming, "You two are my wings!" like a certain (TV) kabuki actor, and just going for harem mode—but truth be told, I couldn't imagine myself saying those words.

Besides, I had a sneaking suspicion that if I took that route, I'd end up stabbed by someone.

"...Siiiigh..." I sighed for the umpteenth time. I lay on my desk like some kind of invertebrate—but suddenly a knock came at my door.

"Yeah?" I asked, springing up again. Maybe it was Myusel? Wh-What should I do? What if she was here to say "I love you"?! My heart wasn't ready! I would probably be torn to pieces between my happiness, and my guilt towards Petralka!

But when I said, "Wh-Who's there?" the voice I heard back through the door was confident and bright.

“’s me! Shinichi-sama!”

“Elvia?” I muttered, blinking.

So... not Myusel.

Partially relieved, I stood up and went to open the door. Standing there was a girl with a cheerful smile on her face. Her eyes darted this way and that, her short brown hair curled in places; everything about her said “full of energy” even when she was just standing still. She had all the sweetness of a big dog.

Her body was lean and well-exercised, her midriff exposed, and her generous chest practically spilling out of her tube top—the look was downright dirty, but her forthrightness and brightness kept me from feeling too steamy about it.

Her name was Elvia Harneiman. She was a former spy for the nation of Bahairam, but—well, things happen. Now she was living here as Amutech’s artist in residence. Other details? Each side of her head boasted a floppy ear, and her behind was home to a bushy tail—that’s right, she was a demi-human. Specifically, a werewolf.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Can I come in?” Elvia said with an innocent smile.

“Huh? Yeah, sure.” I stepped to one side and gestured Elvia into the room. She took a few steps into my office, then stopped and looked me right in the face. I looked back, not completely sure what was going on. Looking at her face, though, it was impossible not to notice the cleft, the valley between those huge, soft peaks, just at the bottom of my vision. We’d been living in the same house for quite a while now, and you’d think that valley would have lost some of its power to entrance me, but not so. Elvia, in fact, wasn’t very modest toward me—she didn’t get upset even if she noticed me staring at her boobs—and I had the distinct sensation that I spent more and more time doing exactly that.

“Shinichi-sama?”

“Er, yeah!” I quickly pried my eyes away from her chest.

“So Myusel and Her Majesty both made lunch for you today.”

“Oh, uh, yeah... At school...”

I didn’t think Myusel would deliberately tell Elvia about that; I suspected she had heard from Minori-san or Hikaru-san. Both of them seemed to have enjoyed the little scene, and it wouldn’t surprise me if they had told Elvia about it to entertain themselves.

“Well, I’d like for ya to eat mine next.”

Huh? What? Don’t tell me Elvia made a—

I took a good look at her, but she didn’t look like she had anything edible with her. She was standing there empty-handed, looking just like always.

No, wait—on closer inspection, I saw she had a white ribbon or scarf of some kind wrapped around her neck, but that was about the only difference from usual.

“Um... What am I eating, exactly?”

She grinned and replied, “Me!”

“What?!” I goggled at her very energetic answer and reflexively took a couple of steps back, only to find myself bumping up against my desk. Elvia took a couple of steps forward, still grinning, so we were just as close as we were before, or maybe even closer.

“No... Wait...”

Eat—Elvia—eat... What did that even mean?!

Was that white thing wrapped around her neck—was it supposed to be a

table napkin?! Eat? “Eat”?! If that didn’t mean, you know, like, splatter-movie-type... like... outright cannibalism, then the only thing I could think of was, it had to be, an 18-and-up-rated— [technical difficulties]

“E-Eat? You mean, like, *eat*? Like, umm, you can’t mean—l-like s-s-sexually?!”

“I mean sexually.”

Thus said Elvia, still smiling innocently.

As far as I knew, the once-a-month thing where Elvia went into heat (a special characteristic of her people) was supposed to be a ways off yet, so why was this coming up now? Why at this moment? What was with this girl’s timing?!

And then the pieces fell into place.

“Hikaru-san! I know you’re there!” I shouted at the door, which Elvia had left hanging open.

For better and for worse, Elvia was a very straightforward person. That extended to her speech; she always said exactly what she meant. She wouldn’t think of an expression like “eat me,” and she certainly wouldn’t think to accompany it with a table napkin.

Several seconds passed. Then, the fringe of a Gothic-Loli skirt appeared in the doorway.

“I knew it!” I said. Hikaru-san, frowning in a *you-got-me* sort of way, looked into the room. “I knew you had to be behind this! Why won’t you stop teaching Elvia all this sick stuff?!”

“You’d think a fundamentally unpopular loser of an otaku, finally getting his once-in-a-century moment to hit it off with the girls, would be more, you know, excited. That he would *do* something. I mean *anything*.”

“You’re not wrong, but I can’t believe you would put it that way!”

“Herbivores should just shut up and be eaten by carnivores!”

“What does that even mean?! How can you drag Elvia into your stupid little games?!”

Elvia was so innocent that it was easy for a villain like Hikaru-san to string her along without her really knowing what was going on. It wasn’t like I didn’t understand that it was funny to get a rise out of me, but I objected to his using Elvia as a tool to do it.

“I didn’t *drag* her,” Hikaru-san said, looking away poutily. The way he made that gesture was really cute—even though he *was* a he—and I wondered if that was why he was so mischievous. But never mind.

“I just thought, Elvia’s the only one who’s sort of behind here, so I wanted to help her out,” Hikaru-san said.

“Help her out.”

Yeah, right.

“You know, be her cheerleader.”

“For what? What were your cheers leading her to do?”

There was a pause. Hikaru-san looked back at me and narrowed his eyes. Finding myself pinned by his exasperated glare, I involuntarily gave ground. “Wh-What...?”

“Are you seriously asking me?”

“Am I asking you—what? Anyway, Elvia’s got nothing to do with this, so—”

“What *are* you talking about?” Hikaru-san said with an elaborate sigh. “Elvia, you love Shinichi-san, too, don’t you?”

“Now you’re the one who’s not making any—”

“Sure, I love ’im!”

“—sense?”

I froze when I heard Elvia’s energetic response.

“You love him as a *man*, don’t you?”

“Absolutely!”

“*Sexually*, right?”

“How... How else would I love him?” Her answers were unhesitating and unfiltered.

.....*Wait.*

Both of you, just wait.

I looked at Elvia to find her looking back at me with her usual bright grin. Then there was her fluffy tail (gosh, it looked like it would feel good to touch), which was wagging so hard you could practically hear it.

Oof... This was—

“Um, do you really... Does she really—?”

“I can’t believe you haven’t noticed it. Elvia *obviously* isn’t interested in anyone but you, Shinichi-san.” That was Hikaru-san, still sounding thoroughly sick of me.

“N-No, nonono, hang on. That’s just because of her phase of the moon or whatever, right?”

I mean yes, Elvia had shoved me down on the bed once, and one time she dragged me to the bathing area and tore off my clothes! But those were

both because she was in heat! Her thoughts and feelings had nothing to do with it!

"If she was just possessed by the moon—if she really didn't care who she did it with—she'd be out in town right this minute hunting down a random man."

"Erk...?"

C-Come to think of it, Elvia had mentioned once that not just anyone would do.

"Shall we find out for certain? Elvia, do you love Shinichi-san here?"

"I adore him!" Her smile was the picture of innocence. There was no room to think she might mean "as a friend" or "as a housemate."

Which left only one option...

"E—Elvia..."

This girl was inescapably direct. When I thought about it, I realized I hadn't heard the words "I love you" even from Myusel or Petralka. Hearing them from Elvia, with no hint of shyness or embarrassment, was actually really moving. By which I mean the blood was rushing to my head.

On top of that, having made this cheerful pronouncement, Elvia did something very unusual: she blushed, a demure look coming over her face.

"Eh heh heh," she added. "Guess I'm feelin' a little shy." She fidgeted and looked at me hesitantly.

G-Geez, this is a totally new side of her!

But wait, did this mean...?

"E-Elvia, you too...?"

"Are you *just* noticing?" Hikaru-san said.

Okay, so now that I thought about it, maybe there had been clues! Maybe a few! But! But!

.....

Anyway, that's the story. The story of how, unbelievably, my options expanded from two to three.

Arrrgh...

And so it went. In order to escape from Elvia and Hikaru-san, I fled to the living room, holding my head. Maybe a closet or the attic would have been a better hiding place, but if they found me somewhere like that, I

would have nowhere else to run. I liked to think that even Elvia wouldn't try to jump me in the living room, where anyone might show up at any time.

Still, I had to ask myself: seriously, what was I going to do? I know it must seem like an indulgent question. A harem was supposed to be every guy's dream, right? The "harem route" in a gal game was the prototypical example: the best ending, where everyone winds up happy.

But in reality, I didn't think it would ever happen. For one thing, there would be arguing for sure. There already *had* been arguing, between Myusel and Petralka. I don't think there are many women who would just conveniently go "I don't mind if you have other women besides me."

For that matter, even if, in theory, I could get Myusel and Petralka to both go along with the idea, there was the simple legal problem that I could only marry one person. There would always be a rank, an order.

Wait—speaking of laws, this was Eldant. Another world. Polygamy might be illegal in Japan, but what about here? And even if it was illegal here, one of the partners to this marriage would be the all-powerful monarch, and she could change the laws! Maybe I should ask Petralka if it was possible to get a one-man-many-wives system recognized in—

No, no, NO! Stop that! (Rim shot.)

I ended up putting a little comedy *ba-dum-pishh* after my own thoughts to try to break them out of the corner they were increasingly getting stuck in.

Just then...

"Shinichi-kun?" Minori-san wandered into the living room. The moment she spoke, I flinched, ready to run away at full speed. She looked perplexed. "What's wrong?"

"N-Nothing. Really." I quickly tried to force a smile. I didn't expect Minori-san to be any more help than Hikaru-san had been. They were both, in effect, my enemies. I wanted to know what I had ever done that made it so fun to torment me, but in fact I already had a whole host of ideas, and I thought it would destroy me to hear Minori-san actually spell it out.

But there was someone else right behind her.

"Hullo."

It was a middle-aged man in a battered old suit. His narrow eyes and perpetual smile made it look like he was wearing a mask—and *that* made it hard to know what he was thinking.

Matoba Jinzaburou-san, that was him. In a word, he was my superior at Amutech. He traveled frequently between Japan and Eldant, handled any importing that needed to be done, and took care of paperwork and other details that needed attending to. That, at least, was the front he presented here in Eldant. Behind all that, he was almost like a spy, sent by the Japanese government to keep an eye on me. He was on their side more than mine—that is, the side that had tried to commit a cultural invasion of the Eldant Empire. In my mind, there was still some question whether I could really trust him if push came to shove.

But anyway.

"Matoba-san, you're here too? What for?"

"I'm done with my business in Eldant. I'm just about to head back to Japan. But you see, I finished a little early, and thought I would come check on you. And what should I hear but that something rather unusual is going on."

"Rather unusual? Gee, uh..."

"At least, *I* would consider being in a love triangle with an empress and a maid to be unusual."

"Oh," Minori-san interjected, "if you count Elvia, maybe it would be a love square?" That was not helping! She must have run into Elvia and Hikaru-san on her way here and found out everything.

"Hmmm. Quite the operator, aren't you?" Matoba-san said in an appreciative tone.

"H... Help me, please..." I responded.

I had a bad feeling, asking this person for help, but this one time, I knew I couldn't count on Minori-san or Hikaru-san, and meanwhile Myusel, Elvia, and Petralka were all personally involved. There was no one around me that I could turn to for advice. And obviously, stewing about it by myself wasn't getting me anywhere.

"Hmm..." Matoba-san said thoughtfully, sitting down in the chair across from me. Minori-san sat next to him, gleefully watching me sweat.

"I understand being spoiled for choice," he said. "And I know all three of those girls really care for you. But doesn't one stand out over the others? Isn't there one you would pick if somebody forced you to?"

"I *can't* pick, that's the problem!" I wailed. "Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia are all really cute, and all so distinct, and they're all great girls, aren't they?! If I were capable of cellular division, maybe I could split into three

of me and date all of them! Doesn't Japan have the technology to create robot doubles yet? Or clone me or something?!"

"Uh, you're pretty much only succeeding in making yourself sound like a creep so far," Minori-san said, squinting at me.

"I *know*!" I groaned. Heck, if *I* ran into somebody saying all that with a straight face, I would want to punch them with a running start!

"Hooo..." Minori-san briefly closed her eyes, a concerned look on her face, then she opened them again and turned to Matoba-san with a sigh. "You heard the man. You have any advice for him in your, uh, inimitable style?"

"Who, me?" Matoba-san said innocently.

"You're the one he asked for help. Or at least advice."

"Hmm." Matoba-san crossed his arms, cocked his head, and then sat that way for several seconds. Then he said flatly: "Well, as for me personally, I'd like you to try to bag the empress if you could."

"So you're saying, choose Petralka?"

"Everything Japan and Amutech are doing here, we do at the pleasure of Her Majesty, because of her vaunted affection for you, Shinichi-kun."

"So... you're *not* encouraging me to go with Petralka for the sake of love."

"I'm saying you should think of things holistically." Matoba-san shrugged. "The entire problem is that your feelings alone aren't settling the issue, isn't it? Then why not consider what else you might gain from the match?"

Yikes. This guy could be D-I-R-E-C-T. Of course, I knew that already.

Profit. Value. What that made me think of was Prince Rubert, who had proposed to Petralka practically the other day. He hadn't proposed out of love, either; for him, it had to do with social position and a number of other benefits. I knew nobles and political types had to think of marriage that way, and that it wasn't always a terrible thing. But—

"But in that case, you'd really feel bad for Myusel," said... Minori-san, surprisingly. "She loves Shinichi-kun so much."

"Huh...?"

"Hm...?"

Matoba-san and I both looked questioningly at Minori-san. He didn't seem to expect that comment any more than I did, and his normally all-but-invisible eyes had widened slightly, presumably in surprise.

“What?” Minori-san said.

“Nothing... It’s just, knowing you, I thought you would back Petralka.”

“Why?”

“Well, if Petralka and I were—hypothetically, okay? Hypothetically, if we were going out...”

“Uh-huh.”

“I might... Well, I thought maybe you would think that over time I might get friendlier with G-Garius... You know?”

Minister Garius en Cordobal was Petralka’s cousin and a knight who served near her at all times. Gorgeous, smart, and a fine fighter, it seemed like someone up there must have really, really liked him, because he got all the good stuff. He, however, was—well, let’s say *not interested in women*, and in fact had been very (uhh) close to Prince Rubert once upon a time.

And as difficult as I found it to believe, even he—ahem—didn’t think badly of me, if you know what I mean. Minori-san, in addition to being a WAC, was a completely rotten fujoshi, and I’d thought she would have relished the idea that by getting close to Petralka I would ultimately be getting closer to Garius, too. And yet...

“Oh, is that what you were hoping for?”

“No, definitely not.”

I had only been saying what I thought *Minori-san* might like. One hundred percent *not* what I personally hoped for. I like girls. Cute girls. (It’s important, so I said it twice. I’ll say it as many times as I need to.) Men were not on my radar, not one bit. Out of sight, unnoticed, not even there.

I guess Matoba-san must have been thinking the same thing I was, because he was sort of half-smiling and murmuring, “Indeed, indeed.” During the Rubert incident, he’d seen with his own eyes just how rotten this girl was, so it was a natural assumption.

“Gosh, you guys.” Minori-san pursed her lips as if to say she found all this very hurtful. She was older than me and normally someone I could lean on, but sometimes she showed a childish side. Her baby face made the sulky expression really cute, and... Uh-uh! *Not the time to be thinking about that!*

“I do know how to keep business and pleasure separate,” Minori-san said. She crossed her arms. Just beneath her chest. That only emphasized her boobs—obviously bigger than Elvia’s—and left me with no idea of where to put my eyes... *Not the time to be worried about that, either!*

She certainly didn't *seem* like she knew how to separate "business and pleasure." Maybe she didn't actually realize how she acted?

"Myusel is the one I'd like to see rewarded," Minori-san said with a quiet smile. "I've seen how faithful she is, living here in this mansion. When you were captured by Bahairam, Shinichi-kun, she was so desperate it almost hurt to see. You know she stole my pistol and pointed it at Elvia?"

"Minori-san..." Gosh, she really had a kind streak.

"And..." Minori-san was talking quietly. "Anyway, picturing Garius-san writhing and wishing for his reward is practically enough for me to live on..."

"Don't say things like that with that look of pure contentment on your face."

"Love that you can't abandon, even when you know it will never be returned... The gossamer nature of unrequited feelings... It's irresistible!"

"You aren't separating anything!"

Maybe that rottenness had penetrated so deep she *couldn't* separate the two anymore. BL, thou fearsome thing!

Buuuuut.....

Hikaru-san was basically in Elvia's corner, and Matoba-san sounded like he was on Petralka's side, while Minori-san was openly advocating for Myusel. I'd looked for advice, knowing I wasn't going to solve this problem on my own, but I found everyone's opinions completely divided, and now things seemed even worse than when I'd been confronting the whole situation on my own. Was this my fault?

"Aw, what am I gonna *do*?"

Confronted with Minori-san, who even at that moment was staring into the middle distance, picturing how delicious Garius looked as he pined away, I could only slump my shoulders and heave a sigh.

"*Ah-choo!*" I quickly put my hand to my mouth to keep the sneeze from flying everywhere.

"Are you quite all right, Garius-dono?" Elder Zahar asked, looking at me.

"I'm fine. It's nothing."

"You've a cold?" The lips beneath the old man's mustache curled into a

thin smile.

"No. Can't say there's been anything unusual with my nose or throat."

"Well and good, but... still, the stress must be getting to you. You've kept yourself so busy lately. A young man ought to take a break every now and again, let himself relax... But I suppose that won't do now. I'll have the royal physician mix up a simple treatment for you."

"I would appreciate that," I said. At the moment I had a great deal of work that needed taking care of, a mountain of issues that had to be addressed. I had no time to relax and recuperate.

"And I know how you suffer on account of Her Majesty," Elder Zahar added. I didn't respond, but I could feel a sour expression on my face.

Of late, Her Majesty had become ever more eager to leave the castle. It seemed Shinichi was her objective. She had always liked to go to see him, but recently the demands seemed more and more frequent—or at least more insistent. Today, for example, she had proclaimed that rather than finish the two days' worth of work she had waiting for her, she would go to the school. And ultimately she did, though at least it seems she was compelled to bring bodyguards. Knowing that Prime Minister Zahar would break if she applied enough pressure, she waited for a moment when I was not there, making her little demand of the prime minister alone.

It was all a great deal of trouble she was causing. It is not that I failed to understand the pressure attendant upon assuming the throne at just seventeen years of age, but if she became too willing to throw her proverbial weight around, it would mean more work for everyone. In fact, just yesterday, it seemed, she personally summoned the chef and gave him some kind of orders...

Perhaps I would have to give her a stern talking-to one of these days.

"I must apologize for her," I said.

"Heavens, you have nothing to apologize for," Elder Zahar said with a smile. Still, just now, I was probably the only one in a position to scold Her Majesty. If she was acting selfishly, it could be said that it was because I had been too indulgent with her. "And in any event, *this* is more important than Her Majesty right now."

"Yes... Of course." I dropped my eyes to the floor.

The two of us were in what was effectively the deepest chamber of Eldant Castle. This building had been carved wholesale out of a mountain, and there was nothing in the world to rival it for size; it contained a

practically innumerable quantity of rooms. Even to consider storage areas alone was to contemplate food stores, treasure rooms, armories, and miscellanies—several of each in sizes large and small.

Some of those rooms contained things that were not to be taken outside the castle. Some of them had doors that were not to be opened.

Many of the contents of such places were magical items of unknown construction.

"Well, quite the collection, isn't it..."

At our feet was a panoply of items of every size. All of them magical, that much we knew, but all widely divergent in appearance. Many appeared to take the form of swords or shields, but some looked like eating utensils or clothing, while others had simple shapes like a ball or a stick. It was truly a motley assortment, and it included items we didn't even know the use of. I could hardly believe there were so many *things* there.

"And all of these...?"

"Yes. According to our records, all of them are capable of interfering with the mind or spirit." The answer came from a woman standing beside us, a mage who was responsible for overseeing our stores. "I must ask you to be cautious, sirs. Some of these items could activate and put you under magical control at merely a touch."

I had just been reaching out to take one of the items, but thought better of it. "I see... Dangerous business indeed."

That, of course, was why these items were locked up here.

"That mirror over there transports anyone who looks into it to a nightmare world," the witch said, indicating something draped in a cloth and tied with copious ropes. "And that necklace causes everyone around you to be attracted to you if you so much as put it on."

"I see..."

It appeared that mind control took many forms and meant many things. Even the magic rings many of us used on a daily basis were in this category, but the decisive difference between those rings and these items was the degree of control or interference they represented. The interpreter rings were ultimately nothing more than an aid to telepathic communication. The magic worked because both parties had the intention to align their understanding. Hence why even the largely unmagical lizardmen could use them. They were simple as magical items went, the method for making them was well known, and they were in abundant supply.

But when it came to serious mental-manipulation magic—what might even be called mind control—such items were of a vastly different kind from those simple rings. They could break a human mind, or take away a person's free will. What's more, many of them could do it without being activated, so to speak, by any human intention, so it would be all too easy to have an accident. This was risky, what we were doing.

Some of the items were so old, their origins so obscure, that even the way their magic functioned was not well-known to our mages, and thus counteracting their effects was difficult. Hence the special storage area deep in the bowels of the Imperial Castle. Normally, people in our position would never even approach the place. But necessity had driven us to this dangerous survey.

Not long before, Prince Rubert of the Kingdom of Zwelberich had sought Her Majesty's hand in marriage. The prince had attempted to assassinate Shinichi, whom he saw as a potential obstacle to the success of his proposal, by using mind-control magic on Shinichi's maid, the half-elf Myusel. Thankfully, his efforts failed, after which his proposal was naturally declined and things returned to normal. Such as it was...

"Our only saving grace has been that Zwelberich has always viewed mind control magic as something to use on demi-humans."

There was considerable prejudice against demi-humans in Zwelberich, a strong view that humans were the master race, such that the people of the kingdom saw nothing wrong with using magic on their demi-human compatriots. In fact, it was said in some quarters that Zwelberich knew so much about mind control magic precisely because they had developed it as a way of keeping their demi-human population in line.

In other words, it was widely accepted there that mind control magic was something humans used on demi-humans; it was not conceived of as something a human would cast on another human. It would not be an exaggeration to say that that fact had saved us during the recent incident. Consider, for example, if it had occurred to Prince Rubert to use mind control magic directly on Her Majesty. She would certainly not have turned down his proposal, and most likely would have ceded all her powers as empress to Rubert, making the Holy Eldant Empire not an ally of Zwelberich's but a vassal.

Naturally, if the use of powerful mind control magic caused the victim to suddenly speak or behave very differently from normal, that would be a

liability. We might have noticed such a change in Her Majesty—but then again, we might not have.

Eldant lagged behind Zwelberich in the development of mind control magic, but it was now necessary that some research be done in that direction. The events of the previous days had made that painfully clear. Without some example to follow, however, any work we might do would be no better than groping in the dark. But by the same token, if we could procure some kind of mind control magic that we might use as a yardstick, it would be a boon to our research project.

Obviously we couldn't go to Zwelberich asking for help. Thus, Elder Zahar and I had come to this storeroom full of forbidden magical items in hopes of finding an example to follow.

"Excuse me..." We were surprised by a girl's voice, flat and toneless. Elder Zahar and I looked up from the items at our feet, peering deeper into the room, from whence the voice had come.

Two humanoid forms loomed there, each a good two heads taller than me. Despite being basically human in shape, they didn't *feel* quite human, and the length of their limbs was obviously not to normal human proportions. Dolls? No—puppets.

Made of wood, metal, and leather, these things could be controlled by magic, in order to do work for their masters. They represented the safest way to transport magical items that could be dangerous to touch—and the dwarves were the undisputed masters of controlling such creations. The two puppets walked up to us, accompanied by heavy footsteps, and on the floor they set a box they had been carrying.

From behind them appeared two dwarves, the ones who had been controlling the puppets. One was a petite young woman, the other a gruff older man. Both had the short stature and greyish skin characteristic of dwarves, but that was about all they had in common. The girl was Lauron Selioz, a young woman exceptionally talented in the control of dolls and puppets, to the extent that she had even been given the duty of puppeteering Her Majesty's body double. She rarely showed much emotion, but Elder Zahar and I were both well acquainted with her diligent work, and she was a natural choice for this job.

The middle-aged man was Rydel Guld. He was the foreman of Guld Workshop, one of the very best production centers in the nation. It was his family that had excavated the royal castle. Despite being a dwarf, he was accorded a status nearly equal to that of a human noble; he was one of the empire's most important people. He was also Lauron's former superior. He, too, had been summoned to control one of the puppets. They would both normally have been too important to bother with menial labor like this... but considering what we were actually doing, we needed to keep our numbers small and trustworthy.

"My, my... This is going to put this old body through the wringer," Prime Minister Zahar said, casting his eyes once more over the magical items lined up before us.

We weren't talking about a handful of inventory. We had dozens, or perhaps even hundreds, of items to inspect, many of which were immensely dangerous to handle, and we didn't know if any of them would even be of help. It demanded vigilance and care—dangerous and draining work.

"But it will prove a good opportunity," I replied. Even before the events with Zwelberich, I had been considering the burgeoning necessity of investigating mind control magic. For example, the so-called "Puppet Drake" developed by our neighbors Bahairam: that, too, was presumably a form of this magic, although also not intended for use on humans. Such magic might not seem destructive in and of itself, but it was very much a weapon. Setting aside the question of whether we would use such a weapon ourselves, so long as our enemies had it, it was incumbent upon us to learn at least enough to prepare countermeasures.

Sounds like something Shinichi would say, I mused, and the thought brought a smile to my face. I had learned much since he came to our country. Shinichi, evangelist of the culture of another world entirely, had a way of shaking us out of our most entrenched notions—what might be called tradition if one were feeling favorable, and meaningless habits if not. More than once, he had called my attention to things that had seemed so natural to me I had never even thought about them.

He was an interesting man. Someone the like of whom I had never had around me. I had the surprising feeling that if we were to consult with him about this magical research, he might think of some method we hadn't considered. Sometimes there is a perspective one can only gain by *not* being too close to a matter.

When we were done with this selection, perhaps we could both go with Her Majesty to Shinichi's mansion, as a way of refreshing ourselves.

The thought comforted me as I gazed at the heaps of magical items sitting before us.

Chapter Two: More Like HARMOR!

Rest days meant taking it easy on both my body and my mind. I might have been a teenaged former home security guard, but I did teach at my school on a regular basis, plus I had my job as Amutech's General Manager to deal with, and all of that could make a person tired after a while. No matter how sweet it looked like I had it, this was legitimate work I was doing.

So I usually spent my days off checking out the newest anime, manga, and games, no rush, just taking them in. But today, I wasn't in the mood.

"Siiiiighhhhh..."

Through the window I could see a gorgeous blue sky, not a cloud in sight. It was the sort of weather that would normally energize me just looking at it, but the way I was feeling at that moment, it made me want to shake my fist at the sky and shout, "Are you mocking me?!"

"What am I gonna do...?" I moaned, rolling from side to side in my bed.

Myusel. Petralka. Elvia.

All of them cute. Extremely cute. Wildly, wickedly, out-of-this-world cute.

Honestly, all of these girls were way out of my league: me, Kanou Shinichi, whose "specs" as a human being were absolutely, completely average, or even below average. Normally, if you told me I'd won the affections of girls like these, I would have been skipping for joy.

No, the real problem was that I'd won them all at once.

"Gaaahh..."

They say every dog has his day, and every guy has his *moteki*, his moment in the sun, but who knew it could come on so suddenly? And who knew it could be such a headache? I sure didn't. I apologize for all the times I thought, *Explode, you damn Real!* (I mean, not that I really knew for sure if I was a Real right then or not.)

I kept wondering if maybe I should go the harem route, even if people did call me monstrous or pathetic. But every time I had that thought, I remembered the nightmare from the other day. And then I added Elvia to it.

Oof.

Those were the thoughts going through my head when a voice all but burst through the door.

"Shinichi! Are you there?!"

"Heek?!" I sat up in a hurry. "Wh-Wha? Petralka?!"

"Indeed. A 'Yes, I am here' would have sufficed."

"Er—Uh—"

"Hmm! As ever, your room is rife with interesting things, Shinichi!"

"B-B-But why?!"

Without so much as a knock she strode into my room, examining the manga, figures, and everything else around: Petralka, the Empress. I could only sit there in shock.

This wasn't the first time she had barged into my room, but all the others had been back before the room had a "lock" on it. A lot had happened (including a good deal I didn't want to remember), and now every room in the mansion had a magical lock. I'd thought mine had been set. The locks activated automatically, so I didn't even give them much thought. Doors either had to be opened from the inside, or you had to have the key. Or so I'd—

"Oh..."

Standing there in the still-open doorway, I caught sight of a fidgety Myusel. She was holding a card-like piece of gold, most likely the backup key she had been entrusted with. She had copies of all of our keys, in case ours got lost or destroyed. I figured Petralka had coerced her into opening my door. They might have been fighting over me (or something, I guess, so to speak), but when the Empress commanded, a common maid like Myusel had no choice but to obey.

"Wh-What's going on? Why are you here?" I asked. I unconsciously grabbed a comb and ran it through my hair.

Uggghhh! I look disgusting even by my *standards...!*

Until very recently, I had been virtually indifferent to my appearance. But in front of a girl who was (at least with a very high degree of probability) in love with me, I would have liked to have looked just the slightest bit more impressive. I mean, golly gee, after all, I *am* a boy! (Sorry, I know it sounds kind of creepy to have to say it myself.) I quickly tried to straighten my shirt, which unfortunately was thoroughly rumpled from my tossing and turning on the bed until just a moment ago. All of this

was almost unconscious, a reflex reaction.

"Is there some kind of emergency?" I asked, and Petralka's lovely eyebrows drew together. I could almost see the "*Grrr...*" sound effect behind her. She covered the distance to my bed in a few quick strides, put her hands on her hips, and glared at me.

"Are you saying we cannot come simply to see your face?!" Her cheeks were flushed red. She had pale skin to begin with, so a blush really stood out.

Er, but getting back to the point...

"Huh...?" It took me a moment to grasp what she was saying. Then I felt my own face get hot in a hurry. I guess she was telling me that she'd come here for no other reason than to see me. Plus, Petralka had sounded angry, but then she looked away from me, almost like she was embarrassed. *Arrrgh, it's so cute! It's mucho cute-o, Your Majesty!* (See? She's so *kawaii* that I'm mangling foreign languages to say it!) All by itself, it was enough to leave my heart on the verge of overheating.

And at that moment...

"U-Um!"

Myusel, sounding a bit distressed, came into the room. That snapped me out of my raptures about Petralka's adorability.

"Myusel?" I said.

"Um, well..."

She had come into the room, yes, but then she immediately stopped, and didn't say anything else. Or maybe she *couldn't*. She looked weak and vulnerable, watching us from a distance with an expression like she might burst into tears at any moment. She wanted to object, that was the vibe I got. The hand she put to her chest, as if to steady herself, seemed at once so strong and so fragile.

Just having those big, watery eyes turned on me is so ahhhhhh!

This was bad. Anything more and this would be very bad. My heart wouldn't be able to stand it. I would keel over. Die. Check out, shuffle off this mortal coil. *Shinichi has left the building!*

Then there came something that only pushed me closer to the edge.

"Shinichi-sama!" A third person came bounding up to the open door. Needless to say, it was Elvia. "I drew this picture of ya, Shinichi-sama! I wanted t' show.....?"

She flounced into the room, with a big smile on her face and her tail

wagging so fast I thought it might fly off. Then, for the first time, she registered the situation: Myusel standing some distance from the bed, Petralka standing right beside the bed, and me sitting on the bed. She looked at each of us. The girls' eyes all met. Nobody said anything.

Was it just me, or was there an instant where it felt like they might all kill each other? It had to be my imagination. Had to. Probably. I'm sure it was. Because if it wasn't, that would be awful.

An unpleasant silence pervaded the room. At last, Petralka spoke.

"Pardon us, but Shinichi is busy entertaining us." She looked at me. "Aren't you, Shinichi?"

"Huh? I mean, not really—"

"Sometimes I wish y'd give *me* your full attention for once, Shinichi-sama!"

"Er..."

"U-Um, Shinichi-sama..."

First Elvia, then even Myusel (with obvious hesitation) lined up beside Petralka by the bed.

"I w-w-was thinking," Myusel said, "it's been so long since, uh, I asked you to h-help me with my Ja-panese..." Her unique, pointy half-elf ears peeked out from beneath her flaxen twin-tails. Normally pale enough to compete with Petralka, right now they were so flushed it looked like she had a fever. "I d-don't suppose you could...?"

"I could, er, but..."

I could never refuse a request from Myusel. But:

"Shinichi-sama! You gotta look at my picture first! I think I did a great job, don't you?!"

"Both of you get to *live* in this house with Shinichi! Cede his attentions to us for one day!"

"Yeah, but I don't get to go t' school! I can only see Shinichi-sama when he's around the house!"

Suddenly, Petralka and Elvia were arguing, and it felt like the strangest sight I had ever seen. A former Bahairamanian spy like Elvia would, you might think, know better than to get in a fight with the empress of the country she had been spying on. I wondered if Hikaru-san was somehow behind this. I could hear him now: *"When it comes to love, status and social position have nothing to do with anything."* And I could see Elvia taking him completely at his word.

Petralka being who she was, she seemed committed to fighting for me fair and square, rather than using her immense authority to elbow Myusel aside. At the very least, she'd implied as much to Myusel. I wondered if the same thing went for Elvia. That would make her one upstanding young lady. I wondered if that was the sort of thing empresses were taught as rulers.

"Oh, b-by the way, Petralka..."

"Hrm? What is it, Shinichi?"

"Is it, uh, okay for you to be here? I mean, have you told Garius-san?" I was afraid she would get in trouble again if she had left the castle without permission.

"That will not be a problem," she replied.

"Really?"

"Garius and Zahar are otherwise occupied with some business or other in the bowels of the castle. They will hardly notice if we step out for a few minutes."

"I think that's going to be a very *big* problem!"

"We have bodyguards! It is fine!"

"Ugh..."

Fine wasn't the word I would have chosen.

She thought Garius wasn't going to notice this? When Petralka referred to her bodyguards, I assumed she didn't mean the official royal guard, but the unit of maids that sometimes protected her. They knew a smattering of combat techniques so that they could keep Petralka safe (it had certainly saved my neck back when Japan had sent a special ops squad to get me), but they still couldn't hold a candle to a squadron of trained knights.

"C'mon, Shinichi-sama, y' should come to my room!" Elvia grabbed my right arm like an overexcited child. I could hardly resist her werewolf's strength, and I found myself dragged through space behind her.

"Yikes—!" Elvia was hugging my whole right arm against her body. Very, very tightly. And everything above my elbow was pressed right up against her—her ch-ch- her chhaaaaahhhhhhh!

S-So, so soft...! I thought in a rapture, my head lolling from side to side.

A second later, my left arm found itself ensconced in a feeling no less soft and warm—wait.

"Myusel?"

I looked over and realized Myusel was clinging to my other arm. Okay,

so she wasn't as *well-endowed* as Elvia, but there was no question that it was there, I mean her chest, and with my two arms sandwiched next to the girls, it was like their boobs were saying, *take this! No, take* this*! And one of these*—aaahhhh!

"...Y' gotta let him go, Myusel."

"I... I will not...!"

The two of them glowered at each other, still pulling on my arms.

Ow ow ow ow ow!

Elvia was tugging mercilessly, while Myusel, doing the best she could, hung off my other arm with her entire body weight—all things considered, it was pretty uncomfortable.

Argh! Whoever heeds my cries and lets go first is my real mother...!

Wait, what was this, the judgment of Solomon?

Was this... Could it be...? Was this one of those moments when you discover that war is hell...?!

I groaned, overtaken by a rapidly increasing bad feeling. But then—

"Both of you, *let go of Shinichi*!" Petralka shouted, her voice tinged with panic.

Elvia and Myusel both looked startled, and bolted away from me as if they had been physically struck. Petralka's words had been, without question, an order from the Holy Eldant Empress. I'm not sure if even she herself realized how different she sounded from when she had been arguing with Elvia earlier. But at an imperial command, neither Elvia nor Myusel could do anything but obey.

Released from the girls' grips, I let out a sigh of relief. Still, my arms longed to feel once again those chests, the touch of which they still remembered. Then again, if I'd stayed pressed up against them like that, who knows if my such-and-such might have done you-know-what right there in front of everybody—so I suppose I should be grateful to Petralka for rescuing me.

"Ah... Er... Ahem..." With Myusel and Elvia looking at her, Petralka suddenly seemed abashed. So I was right: she had instinctively adopted the tone of an empress a moment ago, but she hadn't forgotten her own vow to battle Myusel on fair terms. She had broken the rules, really, and now she was feeling sheepish.

What a delightfully maladroit girl.

"Shinichi was in trouble, you see..."

“That will never do, Your Majesty.”

This riposte to Petralka’s would-be excuse came not from Myusel *or* Elvia, but from someone who had appeared in the still-open doorway: Hikaru-san. He marched into the room and crossed his arms with an elegant motion. He looked like he was ready to give the lecture of a lifetime; at the very least, you couldn’t deny the authority he radiated.

“Wh-What do you mean by that?” Petralka asked. Even she looked slightly cowed.

“Trying to gain someone’s love through such underhanded methods is wrong.”

“U-Underhanded...!” Petralka said. But she couldn’t quite muster as much indignity as she wanted—she knew she had broken the rules of engagement.

Hikaru-san, looking to twist the knife, said, “Can you even be sure it’s love, if you get it through force like that?”

Petralka almost choked.

“No! And again I say, no!” He made a sideways chopping motion as if he were trying to drop someone with a knife hand. The gesture made his meaning inescapably clear.

...Ahh. You know, I think I remember some guy in Germany a few decades ago who used to do that. The one with the little mustache?

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“You must put yourself as a woman before yourself as the empress, and fight your battles fair and square!”

“Th-This is a battle?” I burst out.

“Girl talk, no boys allowed,” Hikaru-san said.

Uh, pretty sure you should excuse yourself, then, Hikaru-san.

“I can go further!” Hikaru-san exclaimed. “To obtain love by underhanded means has nothing to do with a woman’s attractiveness! In fact, it’s a veritable declaration of defeat, an admission that you can’t win on your own merits!”

“Hrm...!” Petralka grunted, somewhere between angry and mortified. She seemed to be completely taken in by Hikaru-san’s force of argument. Myusel and Elvia both stood by, looking slightly dazed.

I guess I was glad the three of them had stopped fighting, as far as it went, but seeing as it was Hikaru-san who had intervened for me, I didn’t exactly feel safe. Who knew where this might lead? I had the uneasy sense that this was all part of a plan to tweak me in a big way.

“Not to mention, trying to use power to get love like that is the very *script* for a character destined for defeat.”

“S-Say what?” Petralka said.

“The script. It’s a cliché! Something is bound to happen at the last minute to turn the tables on her and leave her, as we say in English, a *loser*.”

Since when do you speak English?!

“A... A cliché, you say...”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s the way things are. A law of the universe.”

Petralka put a hand to her cheek and considered. “H-Hrm. Well, if it is the universe’s own law, then there is nothing to be done...”

“You *believe* him?!” I exclaimed. But Petralka already appeared to be all but deaf to me. I felt like she was probably putting the cart before the horse in a number of ways, but she was pointing to Myusel and Elvia with a series of small nods.

“Very well. We are not the empress at this moment! We are but a woman! You shall treat us as such!”

“Y... Yes, ma’am...”

“Yes’m...!”

Myusel and Elvia both unconsciously straightened up in the face of Petralka’s imperial-sounding instructions. But as proof that they weren’t

completely overwhelmed, Myusel's fists were clenched at her sides, and Elvia's tail stood as straight as if it had an iron rod in it.

Huh? This hasn't resolved anything, has it!

I was starting to get very uncomfortable with the three of them staring each other down. Suddenly, Petralka tilted her head and remarked, "But what constitutes a fair fight?"

Pause from Myusel. Pause from Elvia. The two of them looked at each other.

"Umm... How *do* we do that?"

"Yeah, I dunno..."

Okay, hold on, you three...

Had they really been battling each other with no idea of what they were actually doing?

But I was afraid that if I made some careless quip like that, the result would be "Then let us have another bento competition," or "The one who jumps Shinichi first is the winner," so I decided to keep my peace.

Maybe I wasn't the only one learning that war was hell.

"Well... uh, how 'bout soccer, then?"

"That would hardly be a contest!" Petralka stamped her foot.

Well, she wasn't wrong.

"Cooking, then?"

This time it was Elvia who objected: "Y'd win that hands down, Myusel!"

True. Considering how her beast-person palate differed from mine, Elvia would be at a disadvantage in a cooking contest. Plus, Myusel cooked every day; she was practically a pro. Elvia, at least, would have no hope against her.

It was almost too obvious to mention, but the three of them were different people with different talents. Those different capabilities, combined with varying levels of experience, made anything that might be influenced by those abilities inherently unfair.

"It's really very simple," said... surprisingly, not Hikaru-san.

This voice...

"Hoo hoo hoo! Trouble with love? Trust a very experienced grown woman!" It was Minori-san, sounding full of confidence. I guess she must have heard the commotion. That was all well and good, but didn't she seem a little... different somehow? For that matter, hadn't Minori-san said herself

that she was a very *single* woman whose years without a boyfriend were exactly equal to her lifespan? Again, I was too afraid of the possible consequences to actually voice any of this.

"You each want to shoot an arrow through Shinichi-kun's heart, right?"

"Yes, of course..." Petralka said. I wasn't sure she realized she had effectively just confessed to me.

"Then all you need to know is which of you Shinichi-kun is most moe for."

"Hang on, Minori-san, I don't know about that—"

Should we really be treating "character moe" and love as if they were the same thing? I mean, it was true, you could feel a sort of faux love toward a character, but...

"So, Shinichi-kun. Who *are* you most moe for?" Minori-san asked, and Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia all looked directly at me. Faced with three highly expectant gazes, I nearly crumbled.

"If... If I knew that, I wouldn't be so worried, would I?!"

"A man needs to be clear about his feelings!"

"The whole problem is that I *can't choose*!" I wailed, and Minori-san and Hikaru-san both sighed.

"If you really don't know," Hikaru-san said, "then until you do, we'll need a judge—a *completely impartial* one."

"Huh...?" What was he talking about?

It looked like I wasn't the only one who didn't get it; everyone else was looking at Hikaru-san's beaming face, too. He held up a single finger and said: "We have to make the moe visible."

My vision was dark. I mean, of course it was—I had a black cloth tied over my eyes.

"Ummm....."

I certainly couldn't take it off: my hands were tied to the arms of the chair with belts or something. My feet were likewise strapped to the chair's legs. Maybe I could try to stand up, but I figured the chair wouldn't be happy about it. Blinded and unable to move, about the only way I had of figuring out what was going on around me was to listen very carefully.

What was going to happen to me? I had no idea. To be honest, I was

extremely concerned.

Suddenly, I heard Myusel's voice, right nearby: "Um... What's this?"

"Hoo hoo. Let me show you how to use it," came Hikaru-san's voice. And then—

"Heek?!" I yelped a little as somebody blew into my ear.

"There... See?"

No, no I don't *see!*

As I sat there flummoxed, the blindfold was suddenly pulled off, and my world went white.

"Wh-What the heck's wrong with you?!" My eyes, accustomed to the darkness, burned in the light of the room. I squinted, and a second later my vision went back to normal. I saw a circle of girls (and one guy dressed like a girl) surrounding me. Myusel, Petralka, Elvia, Minori-san, and Hikaru-san.

I looked past them at the room we were in. Furniture and decorations were at a minimum. The desk, though, looked like a tornado had come through: a sewing machine, scraps of fabric, beads... I realized immediately whose room we were in. Hikaru-san's. They had brought me to Hikaru-san's room.

After his incomprehensible proclamation about "visualizing moe," Hikaru-san had blindfolded me and pulled me by the hand before sitting me in this chair and strapping me down.

"What the heck?!"

I knew he had strapped me down, yes, but now I saw that those weren't just belts holding me to the chair. They had cords coming out of them, which ran to a laptop computer on the nearby desk.

"It's a lie detector," Hikaru-san said with a bright smile.

Excuse me?!

Hikaru-san spun the laptop around on the desk so I could see the screen. There was a graph with jagged lines, like an EKG, constantly updating itself, while beside it a bar graph moved sporadically up and down. They were obviously measuring in real time.

But what were they measuring? It was probably my pulse, or my blood pressure, or my body temperature, or the amount of sweat I was currently soaked with. As you probably know, a lie detector isn't an automatic ticket to reading another person's mind. It works on the tiny variations, the physical tics, that occur when a person knowingly tells a lie and feels guilty

about it. The tells show up as changes in pulse, blood pressure, and the other things I just mentioned. A lie detector simply, well, detects them.

"But why?!"

"Just to make sure you're being honest," Hikaru-san said with no trace of malice. "I have some truth serum, too, but it might cripple you, so..."

"That's not truth serum, then! Why the heck do you even have something like that?!"

"The lie detector I borrowed from the JSDF garrison's medical division. It was made for medical examinations, but with the right software, it makes a perfectly serviceable lie detector."

Okay, yes, a medical exam also involved measuring your pulse and blood pressure and all that other stuff! But making a lie detector machine out of it? That wasn't, like, just a convenient life hack. It wasn't like saying, "Oh, we had leftovers from dinner, so I made a nice lunch for you." Was it?!

"Was the blindfold really necessary?! And the bindings?" Were those for some kind of fetish Hikaru-san had? Tell me they weren't for a fetish!

"If I told you I was going to hook you up to a lie detector, would you have gone along with it?"

"Like hell!"

"Well, there you go. I just did what I had to do." Hikaru-san shrugged. "And since you're so wishy-washy, I had to make them good and tight so you couldn't run away when the time came to make a choice." He seemed extremely amused by all this.

Are we sure *this isn't a fetish of his?!*

"So Ja-pan even has such things as these..." Petralka studied everything from my bindings to the cords to the laptop. Just behind her, Myusel and Elvia were looking from me to Hikaru-san and back uneasily.

"You saw the reaction when I blew into Shinichi-san's ear a moment ago, right?" Hikaru-san asked, turning to them. "When a person is agitated, it shows up in their breathing and heart rate, or sometimes perspiration, even if you can't see it on their face. And when you're trying to lie while you're under interrogation, it's very easy to get agitated—meaning we get nice, big reactions."

"Hrm...?" Petralka grunted. She didn't seem to quite understand how the lie detector worked.

"Okay, example. Shinichi-san?" Hikaru-san turned to me with a grin.

“You like to look at Minori-san’s boobs, don’t you?”

“...Huh?”

“You adore big boobs, right? And you’ll steal a glance at Minori-san’s chest anytime you get a chance, won’t you? If she’d let you, you would love to bury your face in that deep valley, wouldn’t you?”

“I—I wouldn’t—”

“See?” Hikaru-san pointed at the screen. Several of the readouts were going nuts—clear evidence that I was, as he put it, agitated. The words LIE DETECTED conveniently flashed on the screen.

What the heck kind of software was this?! Had Hikaru-san written it himself?

“He’s lying.”

“Hold on just a—!”

Behind Hikaru-san, who was smiling innocently, Minori-san was fixing me with a death glare. She had her arms crossed—a little high, as if to protect her ample bosom from my view.

“Wh-What guy *doesn’t* look sometimes?!”

“Unrepentant!” Minori-san snapped. “’Course, it’s not like your harassing ways are anything new...”

“Th-That’s awful...! Besides, you can’t measure what’s in a person’s heart with a machine!” I protested, like the protagonist of some anime.

Lie detectors weren’t infallible. People to whom lying came as naturally as breathing didn’t experience perspiration or increased heart rate when they said something untrue.

“We aren’t trying to read your heart,” Hikaru-san replied flatly. “We’re just trying to read your body’s reactions.”

“Hrk...?”

“The mouth can say what it likes, but the body never lies.”

“Hrrrrk...” There wasn’t much I could say to that.

“So we’re gonna interrogate Shinichi-kun while he’s hooked up to this thing?” Minori-san asked.

“Yep. This is what I meant by visualizing moe.”

“Makes sense!” She nodded, impressed.

I looked at Myusel in hopes that she would catch my subliminal cry for someone to help me—but she was looking at the laptop screen hopefully. This was no good. No one was going to stop him.

“All right, let’s get started.” Hikaru-san cleared his throat and turned to

me. “Shinichi-san, who do you like best?”

I didn’t speak.

“Myusel?”

Didn’t say anything.

“Her Majesty—or should I say, Petralka?”

Not a word.

“Or is it Elvia?”

Uh-uh, not biting.

Hikaru-san’s questions were relentless. But the whole problem was that even with him pelting me with names, I really couldn’t pick one. As I stayed silent, Hikaru-san and Minori-san looked at the computer screen, but —

“His reaction is the same to all of them,” Minori-san observed.

“But they all say LIE DETECTED,” Myusel said fretfully.

“Oh, that just shows that Shinichi-san is agitated. But this *is* a problem. I thought for sure saying the names one by one and observing his reactions would show who he was the most moe for...”

“I’m actually sort of amazed by how completely identical his reactions were,” Minori-san said.

“That’s just another way of saying I’m completely fair and evenhanded, right?!” I almost wailed, feeling Myusel and the others looking hard at me.

“We’re going to need a stronger stimulus.”

Hikaru-san was starting to sound like a mad scientist.

“Stimulus...?”

“Whatcha gonna do to him?” Elvia asked.

“If you’ve got some kind of skinship test in mind, I think Elvia has an unfair advantage,” Minori-san observed. She was mature enough to politely refrain from putting it the opposite way: that Petralka was at a *dis*advantage.

“I agree, that would be unfair... Okay, no physical contact. Visual and auditory stimulation only, then. Right. Maybe we put everyone in outfits Shinichi-san would appreciate, and see who he has the strongest reaction to. How about that?”

“Not a bad idea,” Minori-san said. She nodded, but then tilted her head thoughtfully. “But what kind of outfit *does* Shinichi-kun like? The strike zone for an otaku as serious as him is a bit too big. And his personal collection of manga and doujinshi is too varied to really give us a hint...”

“Hey, hey! When did you ever see my personal collection, Minori-

san?!”

“All our luggage came over together. I had to check the manifest to make sure we weren’t missing anything.”

“B-But you didn’t have to look so close!”

I was an otaku and everyone knew it, but when it came to my doujinshi —well, I had some that weren’t in the best of taste, and I was a bit embarrassed to think a girl had seen them.

“Oh! Come to think of it...” Myusel blinked as if something had just occurred to her.

“What is it, Myusel?”

“Nothing... I just remembered something...”

“If you’ve got any ideas, by all means, share them,” Minori-san said.

Encouraged, Myusel nodded. “Shinichi-sama told me once that a girl instantly becomes more attractive when she puts on a maid uniform...”

“Shinichi-san said that, Myusel? To *you*?” Hikaru-san was positively gleeful.

Why did he look so triumphant?!

“Wh-What’s wrong with that?! Maid moe is my calling! As a general rule, I—”

“But to say it to a girl actually *wearing* a maid uniform? I don’t know...”

“You know, I seem to remember Shinichi-kun couldn’t take his eyes off me when I had to wear a maid outfit once,” Minori-san mused.

“Don’t look at me like that! Don’t look at me like thaaaat!!” I wanted to grab my head, but my hands were still lashed to the chair, and all I could do was writhe uncomfortably in my seat. “Yeah, okay, I like maid uniforms, but so what! Maid-sans are great!” I was on the brink of despair.

“Shinichi-sama...” Myusel looked heartened.

Petralka, for her part, had clearly put the pieces together. “What you are saying is that we and Elvia need only dress like Myusel, is that it?!”

“B-But who wouldn’t want to hug a petite girl in a dress and a tiara?! And a tube top that shows a girl’s midriff? It’s a perfect blend of outgoing and sexy, right?!” I was speaking from the bottom of my heart, but I was met with a long silence and everyone sharing a collective look.

“You mean you like Myusel’s outfit, and Her Majesty’s outfit, *and* Elvia’s outfit,” Minori-san finally said, exasperated, and I nodded vehemently.

“How could I not?!”

“He’s telling the truth,” Hikaru-san said, sounding equally annoyed, as he looked at the laptop screen. “Or more accurately, his numbers are through the roof, and it’s impossible to tell one girl from another.”

“This isn’t getting us anywhere.”

“Maybe if we had them all swap outfits?”

Myusel and the others all nodded: no objections. Then, in a no-time-like-the-present move, they all made to take off their clothes.

Hwhoooaaa!!

“Just a second, Shinichi-kun.”

“What?! You can’t!”

But despite my objections, the blindfold went back on, and I lost my chance to see them changing. It wasn’t like they were stripping naked—what was the problem? But then again, when I thought about it, I realized I didn’t know what Elvia wore under her tube top, if it was anything at all; and I’d heard noble women didn’t necessarily wear anything under their outfits, so there was a chance Petralka didn’t, either... Maybe the blindfold was for the best.

Still, robbed of my eyesight, I found myself focusing everything I had into my hearing. Every rustle of cloth seemed to come to me, and it was strangely erotic.

At last...

“Sorry for the wait, Shinichi-kun,” Minori-san said, taking the blindfold off again. The sight that greeted my eyes was—

“U-Um, ahem...”

Myusel, wearing Petralka’s clothes and blushing very hard.

“Whoa...”

Normally, I only ever saw Myusel in her maid uniform, or in the simple dress she wore when she went out, so the royal garments, flashing with gold and silver everywhere you looked, appeared fresh and new on her. But what really drew my attention was:

“I guess... it is a little small... for me...”

Yes: Petralka was petite. Besides which (although it would have been courting death to say so in front of her) she was as flat as a prepubescent girl. And needless to say, her clothing had been made to measure. Sooooo...

Myusel shifted this way and that, trying to hold down the hem of the dress, which threatened to reveal not just her thighs but really, even her

underwear. Half of her very soft-looking chest seemed about to spill out too, practically begging to escape.

Sexy! It was so darned sexy you'd think she was doing it on purpose!

The whole perspective—the way everything teased you, but was never quite visible—it was like a pulsing wellspring for the imagination...! And what was more—

"Y- You're not th' only one who doesn't quite fit..."

Beside Myusel stood Elvia, wearing Myusel's maid uniform. She looked a little uncomfortable, maybe because she wasn't used to wearing a skirt. On top of that, when Elvia complained that it "didn't quite fit," she wasn't talking about the hem of the dress...

Myusel's uniform was designed to expose the shoulders; in fact, it was pretty revealing, and now it seemed even more so—particularly the chest, which looked stretched about as far as it could go. It didn't *seem* like it was going to spill out; if Elvia had taken her hand away, it *would* have burst out for all the world to see. The chest of the uniform looked like it might tear in half.

"We have had quite enough of complaints about 'small'!"

I was distracted from glancing hopefully at Elvia's chest by Petralka's slightly desperate interjection. There was the empress, apparently trying to hide herself behind Myusel and Elvia. If Myusel was wearing Petralka's clothes, and Elvia was wearing Myusel's clothes, then Petralka, by process of elimination, had to be wearing Elvia's clothes. And that meant...

"Wh-What kind of clothes are these? We do not believe they can even be called clothes!" She looked at the end of her rope.

The size? Not a good fit, naturally. But seeing Petralka stand there, bright red as she struggled to keep the tube top and pants from falling down, was darned adorable, like a kid who had gotten into her mom's closet. And you know what? Kind of sexy, too. Her delicate shoulders, pale stomach, and slim thighs and calves were all on full display. She was desperately using her hands to keep her front covered, but her back and even her butt were exposed by the way the clothes were practically falling down. She might as well have been naked.

"Oh..." Forgetting to pry my eyes away from Petralka's figure, I noticed something where the pants were slipping off her rear end. A complicated pattern on her skin, almost like a tattoo. It was close to the color of her flesh, so it wasn't very obvious, but with the rest of her flushed red, it stood

out.

That had to be the magical crest that was supposed to reflect any offensive spell that was used on her. Empresses were a popular target for assassinations, and she told me once that she had the tattoo to help keep her safe.

"They are too real clothes!" Elvia objected. I'd seen her older sister Amatena, and Amatena's subordinate Clara, wearing their civilian clothes before—it seemed like in Bahairam, where temperatures tended to be warmer, it was common for outfits to be more revealing.

"We do not think so! We may as well be nak—"

Her finger must have slipped, because at that moment, the tube top and the pants went sliding down Petralka's thin body.

Someone almost choked. Was it me, or her?

Her delicate, willowy body, white as snow, was revealed. She was wearing some underwear on her lower half, I discovered, but there was nothing to hide the top. I know she looked totally flat with clothes on, but she *was* a girl, and now I could see the smallest of swells, topped by those sweet, cherry-pink—

"We've got a reading!" Hikaru-san sounded like a radar operator watching for enemy vessels. "Shinichi-san is excited looking at Her Majesty!"

"H-How could I *not* beeeee?!" I wrenched my eyes away from Petralka and wailed. What was he so surprised by?! I was a guy, after all!

"Is that true, Hikaru?!"

"Forget about him, Petralka, just get your clothes back!"

Don't look so thrilled, Your Majesty! Don't go running over to Hikaru-san to look at the computer screen! Clothes first! I'm begging you, hide yourself!

I seemed to remember a time I had accidentally wandered into the girls' changing room when we were filming our own movie. As I recalled, Petralka hadn't acted very embarrassed to be seen in her underwear. Maybe it was because she was so used to having servants around her as she changed—but she didn't even seem to mind being naked. She acted a lot less concerned about having no clothes on than she did about the relative size (if you get my meaning—I'm being politic, here) of her bust and behind.

Meanwhile...

“Shinichi-sama?! Ain’tcha excited by me?!” Elvia flounced over to me, her chest heaving up and down. She bent right over into my face. *Stop, wait, if you bend over like that—your chest—it’ll spill—I mean show—I mean agghhhh!*

“Everyone just put your own clothes back on!” I bellowed, my head spinning so fast I could hardly tell which way was up.

“Seeing them all together like this... I must admit I’m intimidated,” Elder Zahar said, looking at the magical items sitting before us. There had, it seemed, been far more of the mind-control items lying dormant in the castle than we had realized: swords, daggers, shields, equipment, furnishings, pictures, sculptures, and more besides, all crammed in there together.

Every one of these items had a story. Some were simply the products of some mad mage, but I dare say we didn’t even know when or how most of them were made. Some might even have come from ancient times, produced by magical civilizations now lost to us.

“What’s this...?” My interest was drawn by several peculiar items sitting up against the wall. I hadn’t the foggiest idea what they were. Well, to be precise, I knew they were some form of mind-control device. But whereas many of the items took the form of weapons or mundane accessories, these looked different. They weren’t swords, bows, or spears, nor were they shaped like anything one might find around the house. If pressed, I might almost say they looked like statues, if very confusing ones.

They were... lumps. Not too large to get your arms around, and seemingly made of steel. And there were five of them.

“I am told these are suits of armor, sealed up here more than a century ago,” the witch-overseer informed me.

“Armor? These?” I was used to armor looking roughly humanoid in shape, with gloves or greaves or other pieces that would obviously fit on a human body. But here, I saw none of that. The shapes themselves seemed unsuited to anything resembling a human. Perhaps the armor had simply been folded up when it was put away here, and might unfold into more human forms—but even if so, everything about the suits was so confusing that I felt I wouldn’t know which parts of the armor corresponded to which

parts of the body.

“Everything else here seems more or less comprehensible, but these...” These smelled fishy. What’s more, close inspection revealed some kind of writing on them. I couldn’t decipher what it said. Not knowing what might happen if I touched the armor, I resisted the urge to feel out the characters, or to try to wipe away some of the dust. “How in the world is it used?”

“I’m afraid the details of their workings and use are, at the moment, unclear to us...” The witch trailed off apologetically. “However, the records allege that this is cursed armor that once destroyed an entire town.”

“Terrible...”

The ability to wipe out an entire town, even if one supposed it had not been a very large one, was nothing to sneeze at. Of course, stories could easily attach themselves to artifacts this old, myths and tales that shouldn’t be believed at face value. But I took it as a reminder not to act carelessly with something so potentially dangerous. Some of these items could control a person merely by existing.

“Lauron,” I said.

“Yes, sir, the puppeteer girl replied in a flat tone.

“Remove these for the time being—no, return them to their boxes.”

“Return them, sir?” She seemed to wonder why we were putting them away immediately after having gone to the effort of getting them out. Perhaps it seemed to her as pointless as digging a hole only to fill it in.

“There’s someone I wish to consult with. And I need these in a form that can be easily transported to his mansion.”

“Yes, sir.” The dwarf girl nodded, still expressionless, and obediently began to pack the armor away.

Dinner was even more opulent than usual.

“Whoa...”

The number of plates and variety of dishes was staggering. The quantity alone would have left me speechless.

It was all because Petralka was still there, having sworn she wouldn’t go home until things had been settled. And with the empress around, Myusel naturally felt compelled to pull out all the stops for dinner. She might be battling the empress for my heart (wow, can’t believe I’m saying

that!), but in every other respect, Petralka's position demanded the utmost care and consideration from Myusel.

And so, in addition to the usual suspects—myself, Myusel, Elvia, Minori-san, Hikaru-san, Brooke, and Cerise-san—Petralka joined us for dinner, along with four of her maids (read: bodyguards). Dinner was going to be lively, to say the least.

"Good heavens...!" Petralka was looking at the plate she had just eaten from, her hand shaking.

"Your Majesty?!" one of her maids exclaimed.

"I knew I should have tasted it for poison...!" another said. But Petralka seemed more annoyed than anything by their chatter.

"Let us eat in peace! But good heavens, this flavor..."

"You mean 'Talk about a rich taste without the richness overwhelming the rest of the flavor profile'?"

"Mm, 'a deep flavor but with an edge...' No, that is not what we meant!" Petralka reflexively picked up my otaku-ish quote, but quickly backpedaled. "Yes, it is indeed delicious, but we have a different question. Is this not... you know, that thing we ate in Ja-pan?"

"Huh? Oh—*Oh*! *Yakiniku*?" I said, referring to a Japanese style of grilled meat.

"Yes, that!" Petralka said, leveling an excited finger at me. She had just eaten a small-cut piece of meat. Eldant cooking tended to favor simple preparations, with just a light dusting of salt and spices before cooking, but this had been marinated. Come to think of it, back when we'd had dinner at my house, Petralka *had* seemed uncommonly impressed by simple yakiniku. I guess she didn't taste a lot of rich flavors like that, and it was still novel for her. Plus, as the conversation with her maids made clear, Petralka normally only got to eat after a taster had checked her food for poison—which maybe meant she had limited experience with warm, freshly cooked food. She was just like the daimyo in *The Sanma of Meguro*.

"Did you indeed make this, Myusel?" Petralka asked, her eyes wide.

Myusel stopped eating for a moment. She looked embarrassed to be complimented. "Y-Yes, ma'am. Oh, but I had help from Cerise-san..." She looked over at our other maid—Cerise.

Specifically, Cerise Darwin. Wife of Brooke Darwin, our gardener. Neither of them was, well, human. Both came from a tribe of demi-humans called lizardmen, and they really did look like bipedal reptiles. When I first

met them, something about them (maybe it was the scales) made it hard to read their expressions. Sometimes they had even freaked me out, and I had worried that I might not ever really get to know them, but now we had all largely come to understand each other, and I was even getting more adept at reading their faces.

"No, we are referring to the additional flavor. Did you not add it yourself?"

"That's true. Just as you suppose, Your Majesty, it was my humble attempt to re-create the 'yaki-niku' spices I received at Shinichi-sama's house. Several of the ingredients were hard to obtain, so I had to use local substitutes..."

"Goodness..." Petralka said, maybe more impressed than she needed to be.

Needless to say, there was no such thing as "yakiniku sauce" here. So if you didn't specifically import it, then you would have to try to get together a similar set of herbs and spices to get a similar flavor. Come to think of it, hadn't I heard that pepper was worth more than gold in Middle-Ages Europe? A surprisingly large number of spices, be it chili oil or soy sauce, had unique flavors.

"You must have exerted yourself considerably. And not on this dish alone..."

"Actually, I was preparing dinner before you arrived, Your Majesty, so that one didn't take all that much effort."

Well, I guess it was just a matter of grilling it, although you had to keep an eye on it while it was cooking.

"Yet with so many dishes, to have them all come out warm..."

"Cerise-san was kind enough to keep an eye on the temperature of each dish," Myusel said.

Brooke and Cerise tended to eat their vegetables and meat more or less raw—but that wasn't the product of any kind of discrimination towards them on our part. They just preferred things that weren't as cooked. But in any case, lizardmen had the ability to detect the infrared spectrum, similar to how what we called pit organs worked in our world. They were like nature's infrared goggles, and lizardmen could get a sense of how hot something was just by looking at it.

"Indeed? So it was made possible with the help of your lizardman there—Cerise, is that what you said her name is? A fine display."

“Your words honor us, Your Majesty.”

“You needn’t be so kind, Majesty...”

Myusel and Cerise both bowed. Cerise in particular was probably a little bit taken aback, for she had never heard the empress speak her name before. I didn’t think anyone else had noticed, but I saw her tail wrap gently around Brooke’s beneath the table.

Is that, like... the way humans would hold hands?

“Ahh. It is not just your ya-ki-ni-ku. It’s this—and this—! All of them imbued with the most wonderful flavors.” Petralka pulled from one novel dish after another. Her maid-guards had given up warning her about poison and had begun to eat from their own plates; by the way they kept looking at each other, I figured the flavors must have surprised them, too.

Yes, Myusel was a top-notch chef. She was so good at it that you would never have thought she was self-taught—she must have had some sort of inborn talent for taste. Did it have to do with her elvish blood? Or was it just something special about Myusel herself? I didn’t know.

“Complex though this flavor is, one does not tire of it,” Petralka remarked. “And to think, you know Shinichi’s preferences as well. Hmm. Perhaps we were mistaken to challenge you to a bento contest. In retrospect, we were wrong to have the royal chef beaten as we did.”

“Wait, what?” I could hardly believe my ears.

Beaten? I mean... Sure, you wouldn’t normally expect the castle’s own chef to be bested at cooking by a simple maid, so maybe Petralka had assumed he’d been pulling his punches. But to be ordered to make an unfamiliar thing like a “lunchbox,” to give it your best shot, and then to be beaten when you did it... I didn’t know his name or what he looked like, but I felt awfully bad for that chef. I wondered if he had even realized he had been making that bento for a contest...

“Speaking of,” I said, reminded of a question I’d had. “What brought on that sudden interest in bento boxes?”

I knew it was a trope in romance manga and anime and games and stuff for the girl to give a lunchbox to the boy she liked. A heart-pounding trope! And a lunchbox from Myusel was one thing, but for Petralka to suddenly pop up with a bento in her hands was just out of the blue. I assumed that when the empress went out to eat, she brought the ingredients, the utensils, and the chef with her, and had the meal whipped up wherever she was. I wasn’t sure she would even have thought of preparing a lunchbox and

taking it with her on her own.

"Matoba said, did he not?"

There was a name I hadn't expected to hear. What did Matoba-san have to do with this?

"He remarked that a man has three 'bags,' and the way to his heart is through the one in his stomach."

"The way to— What is he, some old guy giving a toast at someone's wedding?!"

Well, I guess whatever else he was, Matoba-san *was* an old dude. Still, this made it obvious that he had been coaching Petralka since before the boxed-lunch incident. I remembered how he had told me during Rubert's visit that it was important for Amutech's activities that I, Kanou Shinichi, secure the empress's affections. When he found out that Petralka had feelings for me, I should have known he might try to put some ideas into her head. It would have been a lot more in-character than standing calmly by to see what happened.

"The three bags? Aw, man, haven't heard that one in a while," Minori-san said with a dry smile.

"Yeah, people don't talk about that much anymore. But the old folks always throw it in their wedding toasts," Hikaru-san said.

In Japanese, we could describe a lot of things as *fukuro*, bags. Like, say, the *i-bukuro*, the "tummy-bag," or stomach.

"I'm trying to remember what the three bags are," I said. "I think it was... A man's stomach, his mother—*o-fukuro*—and, uhh... what was the other one?"

"Isn't it Ikebukuro?" Minori-san volunteered.

"I thought that was just a place in Tokyo."

"It's a *sacred* place in Tokyo. Man, I wish I could go back there!" Minori-san looked longingly into the distance.

"Come on, I know it has 'fukuro' in it, but that's just a coincidence!"

Stupid, rotten fujoshi brain...! Then again, considering the love triangle she'd devised between a knife, a fork, and a spoon a bit back, maybe it would be better to let her go to Ikebukuro or wherever sometimes, just to blow off some steam.

"Ah! This is the Ike-bukuro of the Otome Road, is it not? We, too, wish to see it on our next trip to Ja-pan!" Petralka said, her face glowing.

"No!" I exclaimed. "No, you don't!"

Please, Petralka, I'm begging you! Don't go that way*!*

But anyway...

"One thing's for certain," Hikaru-san broke in quietly. "Past or present, what's true is true. Catching a man by the stomach *is* a time-honored strategy in love."

"Fair enough, I guess." That would explain why the o-bento was considered such a love potion. I had to admit it was true that a girl who could cook was attractive by default. But... "But the downside is then you eat too much and get fat."

When I said that, time seemed to stop.

Or to be more precise, the munching sounds coming from Petralka, Elvia, Minori-san, and the maids stopped. For some reason, they were all looking vacantly at the utensils in their hands.

N-Now I'm scared...!

"Shinichi-san," Hikaru-san said brightly, a smile on his face. "Which do you like better—thin girls or fat girls?"

"Huh? I—I mean, I guess if I had to choose... maybe... thin girls...?" Even I thought I sounded timid.

"Huh. Interesting. Preference for slender girls, noted."

"Hey, look, they don't have to be anorexically thin or whatever—I like, you know, a well-balanced body. Thin, but... rounded."

Someone who was skin and bones? Not really the girl for me. I wanted a girl's body to be soft. I wanted to be able to drown in the softness. That's a man's romantic dream. And you needed a little bit of meat on the bones for that. Gosh, this was complicated.

"Okay. Next question: What's your girl's ideal weight?"

"W-Weight?" I reached back in my memory and tried to recall a number I'd seen on some video game character's stats once—you know, the sort of thing where they give you the heroine's sizes. I didn't actually pay a lot of attention to the numbers, so I wasn't really sure exactly what I should say. "Uhh, I guess about 40 kilograms?"

Come to think of it, I didn't even know how much my own little sister weighed.

"Forty... keelo-grams..."

"I—I think I saw a conversion chart somewhere before..."

I noticed Petralka, Myusel, and Elvia holding a whispered conference. Ahh. They wouldn't know how much forty kilograms was off the tops of

their heads. They probably only even knew it was a unit of weight thanks to manga or anime or whatever. They were trying to get a feel for what it would be in some local measure.

“.....Shinichi-kun,” Minori-san said, that dry smile still on her face. “I take it you don’t know the average weight of an actual woman.”

“Sorry...?”

“Forty kilos is what a girl might weigh in, ohhh, middle school. Heck, probably even grade school.”

“Huh? But I feel like it’s pretty normal for a video game or anime character...”

“Because they only have to carry two dimensions.” Minori-san’s shoulders sagged. “So Myusel, Elvia, you can just ignore him.”

I glanced over at the girls and found them shifting uncomfortably, as if they were embarrassed. Were they suddenly feeling self-conscious? I mean, because they weighed more than forty kilos?

“And of course,” Minori-san went on consolingly, “weight varies with height, too—”

“‘A woman’s fiftieth kilo is mere self-indulgence!’” Petralka suddenly exclaimed. Something was scrawled in what appeared to be sauce on the table in front of her. Ah—she must have been trying to convert forty kilos into the local measuring system based on Myusel’s hazy recollection of the conversions. “A woman’s fiftieth kilo is mere self-indulgence! A woman’s fiftieth kilo is mere self-indulgence! It is so important, we said it twice!”

I wanted to object that she had actually said it three times, but I resisted. Petralka looked downright gleeful. We were talking about a girl so small you could mistake her for a grade-schooler. And she was slim to boot. She and she alone probably cleared that forty-kilo line. But I had a bigger concern...

"Where did you learn that expression?!"

"Hmm, where was it?" she said, tilting her head and considering.

I was sure it had to be some manga or anime or something, but anyway.

"Now! We are having a competition to be the thinnest!" Petralka proclaimed, getting to her feet.

"Just a second—you're trying to give yourself an advantage!" I said.

At almost the same time, Elvia exclaimed, "Ain't that unfair to the rest of us?!" She almost jumped out of her chair, causing her ears to flap and her chest to heave...

Ahh... That looks heavy... Huh? Come to think of it, hadn't I read in some manga somewhere that by the time you reach an E cup, the two of them together weigh about a kilogram...?

Well, that aside, in a contest of slenderness—or at least body weight—Elvia would clearly be at a disadvantage. She was the tallest of the three girls, and almost certainly the most muscular.

"Bwa ha ha ha ha! There is no padding on our body!" Petralka declared, puffing her chest out and laughing like a bad villain.

P-Padding...!

I mean, I guess if you considered a large chest to be padding, then Petralka definitely had a minimum of it. By the way, they say big boobs float in water—something about the ratio of the fat content. (Something else I read somewhere.) And when fat goes to the stomach, we call it a beer belly—definitely padding.

But still, that word, *padding*...!

There was an audible silence. I looked over to see Myusel putting her hands to her chest and looking thoughtful.

"Is this... padding...?" she asked.

"No, definitely not!" I exclaimed before I knew what I was doing. "Anyway, you can't have a 'slender' competition! You're all different heights!" If they were going to compete, it would be unfair if they weren't all about the same size. Unless they were planning to compare body mass indexes or something. "And besides, if boobs are considered padding, then

Hikaru-san would win hands down!”

“Hmm?” That seemed to amuse Hikaru-san. “Can I be a part of the battle for your affections too, Shinichi-san?”

“Huh? Wait, what? BL? Are you talking BL?! Has he finally opened his eyes?!” Minori-san demanded.

“No! I haven’t opened anything! Hikaru-san just chooses the weirdest way to put everything!”

“You’re the one who said I would win that contest.”

And so it went. You get the idea.

“Oh, for...!”

“A woman’s fiftieth kilo is mere self-indulgence! A woman’s fiftieth kilo is mere self-indulgence!”

“Padding...”

“I’m gonna shrink myself...!”

And so ended that day’s raucous, but entirely inconclusive, dinner.

Myusel and Cerise were cleaning up after the meal. Brooke had headed outside to take care of some things in the garden. Elvia had gone running off, muttering something about body weight and shrinking. Maybe she was going to go run a marathon or something. Her boobs were pretty much the only part of her with any fat to begin with, so I wasn’t sure it would help much.

Petralka, for her part, got into her carriage with her maids, in high spirits, and went back to the castle. Maybe she thought she had “won” the slenderness contest she had unilaterally proposed at dinner. And maybe she had... by default. It seemed to have completely slipped her mind, though, that she had left the castle on her own, and that if Garius found her, she would be in for it. I knew from the time she had sneaked away to Japan that Garius knew how to get good and mad. I grinned to myself as I pictured Petralka hanging her head during Garius’s endless lecture.

I watched the carriage leave from our front door, standing there until it vanished into the distance, then I turned to go back inside.

“Well, Shinichi-kun, look who’s Mr. Popular.” Minori-san, who had been seeing Petralka off with me, leered at me. “It’s your moment! Your *moteki*! Aren’t you thrilled?”

“Are you seriously asking that?” I stopped and sighed.

“Aww, does this mean you’re not thrilled?”

I took a breath. “Of course I’m happy about it. How could I not be? It’s just turning out to be an awful lot of work...”

Without Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia right there in front of me, I felt a wave of fatigue. I hadn’t noticed it when I was busy feeling anxious, but now that I had a moment to catch my breath, it hit me.

“Well, *I* enjoyed myself.” Hikaru-san was smirking behind his hand.

“You sure did!” I exclaimed, practically on the verge of tears. Hikaru-san was almost certainly the person who had gotten the most out of that afternoon.

“And now you’ve got a nifty little square going on, how nice for you,” Hikaru-san said innocently. “Imagine how much worse it would have been if Minori-san had decided she wanted in.”

“I’m rooting for Myusel, but I’m basically a neutral spectator,” Minori-san said, brushing Hikaru-san’s suggestion aside. I knew she was a real adult—she could let that sort of thing just roll off her back. Of course, that partly spoke to how *totally* disinterested she was, but still. And it was just as well. If Minori-san had taken that moment to blush and whisper, “Well, actually...”, I don’t know what I would have done.

“I do think you should try to make a decision soon, though,” she said.

“Believe me, I know,” I said. I knew so well it hurt.

“I get that it’s a tough call, but wouldn’t you feel bad, making them wait too long? This isn’t modern Japan—people get married younger here.”

“That’s... I mean... Yes.” I nodded along, because she was right, but hearing the words *get married* was bound to give me pause. I mean, I was an otaku who had never so much as gone on a date with a girl. To suddenly think about marriage, or—God help me—kids, was almost too much to bear. “Anyway, think about... I mean, *hypothetically*, if I married someone over here, how would that even work, legally? Would that be considered an international marriage?”

“Good question. I don’t think Japan recognizes Eldant as a country. Heck, publicly, they don’t recognize it *exists*. Maybe it could be considered a common-law marriage?”

“It would be, wouldn’t iiiiiitttt...” And then, inexorably, I found myself remembering that nightmare. That had been a de facto union, hadn’t it? But while I was busy freezing my own blood with the image of Petralka and

Myusel both stabbing me at the same time—

"I think there's a lot of ways to choose," Hikaru-san said, as if it had just occurred to him. "Looks, personality, or maybe some combination of the two. But if you try too hard to use logic to figure this out, I think you're going to miss what's most important. Love has a big emotional component. Say the first one to make your heart skip a beat is the winner..."

"Not sure I follow," I said, a little bit lost by Hikaru-san's idea.

"For example, maybe you discover that your assumptions about someone were all wrong, and at that moment, you fall in love with them. Like when you suddenly see a side of a girl or guy that you never knew was there."

"Hmmm..."

"Okay, like, say..." Hikaru-san tilted his head and thought about it for a moment. "You're pretty confident *I'm* not involved in the battle for your heart, right, Shinichi-san?"

Then he gave me a coquettish look, widening his dark eyes.

Wai—what the heck is this?! And... And just a second! Why is my heart suddenly pounding?!

"I've had about enough of that joke! I'm not interested in any guys, okay?!" I shouted, trying desperately to ignore the thumping in my chest. I had to remember. Had to remind myself. No matter how gorgeous he might be, no matter how well he wore that Gothic-Loli dress, Ayasaki Hikaru was well and truly a man. I had personally seen what was between his legs, so he couldn't pull any "*Actually, I've been a girl all along!*" stuff on me!

"BL?! Is that BL I smell?! I knew I smelled BL!" Minori-san was just about ecstatic.

Ugh, I could hardly stand this anymore! What did she mean, she *knew* it?!

"I am so not even about BL!" I exclaimed.

"You know, there's something I never mentioned," Hikaru-san said, out of the blue. "I have an identical twin. But she's a girl."

"Wha...?"

Wh-What was this about an identical twin? A matching guy and girl pair? That was the stupidest, most chuunibyou thing I'd ever—but it would be just *like* Hikaru-san to have a—whaaaaaa?!

"We trade places sometimes. You've never even noticed, have you, Shinichi-san?" Then Hikaru-san smiled teasingly.

It was true: the way he (??) tilted his head like that looked awfully girlish, seriously sweet, downright devilish. The luxurious black hair, the pale, delicate neck. I had to admit it was all sort of starting to turn me on...!

Okay, wait... So the Hikaru-san I was looking at right now, right here in front of me... Could it be...

"Are you r-r-really...?"

"Oh, no, I made it all up."

"You *what*?!"

I mean, I *was* relieved to hear that, but—!

"Identical twins are *identical*. They're usually the same gender."

"Oh... Now that you mention it." I guess he was right.

"But I'll bet you felt your heart pound, didn't you?" Hikaru-san's lips twisted into a nasty little smile. "*That's* what I'm talking about."

All right, okay. I got it now. I got it much better than I had ever wanted to.

"I see what you mean," Minori-san said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "It's like when you find out that punk you thought was way scary is actually a total softy, and you're so shocked by the difference that you fall in love with him. Right?"

"Yeah, more or less." Hikaru-san nodded.

"But, look... You can tell me how it's not logical, but that just makes it even harder to know what to do."

"It's *not* logical. You have to *feel*."

"Gee, you sound like a regular guru, but it's not helping."

I was seriously, completely lost. I could only heave a long, long sigh as I turned to go back inside.

I knocked twice, then waited. I didn't have to wait long. There was surprise on the face that greeted me. Or at least, I thought there was. I was hesitant to be too sure, because their expressions could still be difficult for me to read. Unfamiliar emotions especially could present in unexpected ways, making deciphering them difficult.

"Somethin' the matter, Master?" Brooke's head tilted the slightest bit.

I'd gone back in the house with Minori-san and Hikaru-san, but only for a moment. I'd had a brainstorm, and headed out to visit the little cabin on the grounds—Brooke and Cerise's home. It was actually the first time I had been there. Hence why Brooke looked so surprised. Or at least, I thought he did.

“Sorry to just show up like this. I wanted to get your advice about something...”

“Advice? Mine, sir?” Brooke’s tongue flicked in and out of his mouth quicker than usual. Ah. That I recognized. Not so much surprise as reluctance.

“Can I come in?”

“Certainly, er...” Brooke stepped aside and I walked into the house with a polite greeting.

I’d had a certain idea of what Brooke and Cerise’s room must look like from the way they dressed and acted, and I wasn’t far off—it was a pretty simple place. There were a few wicker chests of different sizes, probably with clothes in them, and a rush mat laid right on the floor, probably their bed. There was no furniture to speak of, but in the middle of the room was a sort of brazier, presumably for warmth.

“Afraid ’tis probably not too comfortable by human standards,” Brooke said.

When two species have completely different physiologies, it only makes sense that they would live in different ways. To me, the room looked plain and simple, but for Brooke and Cerise maybe this was best. Maybe it even seemed luxurious to them.

“Gosh, please, don’t worry about it. I’m sorry for barging in.” I smiled apologetically and shook my head. I was the one who should be careful to be courteous. This could be Brooke and Cerise’s, you know... lizardman “love nest.” If I just showed up uninvited, who knew if I might walk in at a compromising moment?

Speaking of Cerise, I didn’t see her around. Maybe she was still helping Myusel back at the mansion. Well, it was best for me right now if there weren’t any women around. Even lizardman women.

“Please, have a seat. Though... I’m afraid we ’aven’t any chairs.”

“Thanks.”

Brooke gestured at the rush mat (so was it a seat?), and I sat down facing him.

“Now, Master, y’ said you were hoping to get my advice...?”

“Er, yeah. Let’s see here...” I was definitely feeling a little embarrassed. Not sure where to start. Slowly, I began to tell him about what was going on: me. Myusel. Petralka. Elvia. The fact that three different girls had feelings for me. And the fact that Minori-san, Matoba-san, and Hikaru-san

all seemed to back a different one. How even so, I couldn't choose any of them, and I wasn't even sure how to start picking. I told Brooke everything.

Partly, I had come to Brooke for advice because he struck me as the most neutral of anyone in the mansion. But also, he was actually married, and I had thought, hey, maybe that means he knows a thing or two about love. At the very least, he wouldn't play with me for his own amusement like Hikaru-san did. Or least, I thought he wouldn't.

"Ahh, hmm... Bit of a difficult spot, that, isn't it?" Brooke said, after he had heard everything.

Well, yes, yes it was.

"Hikaru-san had this irresponsible idea about measuring who got me the most, like, excited."

"Excited, sir?"

"Yeah. I mean, you know, who I felt the most naughty towards..."

If you thought love could be reduced to its biological presentation, then the idea wasn't completely crazy. But I thought maybe it was a little too, uh... *direct* might be the best word.

"Brooke, why did you decide to marry Cerise?"

There was a pause; Brooke folded his arms as if in thought, and tilted his head to one side. Lizardmen often got stuck being villains in fantasy works, and a lot of people were probably scared of their reptilian faces. But reptiles, from snakes to lizards, also often had big, cute eyes. Brooke looked almost charming with his head to one side like that.

Hey—was this the first time I had ever sat down and *talked* to Brooke man-to-man?

"In m' own case, Cerise was chosen for me, so I didn't have to pick my wife from among several competitors..."

"Yeah. I think I remember you mentioning that."

Brooke was something of a hero among his people, and Cerise was the daughter of a tribal chieftain. They'd married because people had seen them as socially a good match, not—or at least not just—because of their personal feelings.

"But still, you knew her before you were engaged, right?"

"Ah... Yes, well..."

"And did you feel anything for each other then?" That was something else I thought Brooke had talked about before. "You're some kind of lizardman hero, right? There must have been all kinds of women who

would have liked to be your wife. But you didn't pick them."

"Ah... Well, true..." Brooke's tongue slipped in and out of his mouth. "Cerise I knew from before m' days on the battlefield... That is, from before I was called a hero, as you say."

"So she was sort of a childhood friend?"

"Sort of, yes." And so, it seemed, she had been the one for him from long before other women had flocked to him. Huh. So two childhood friends fell in love and got married... Their story was more dramatic than I'd realized.

"So I'm not quite sure m' own experience would be of very much help to you, Master."

"Hmm..."

"Terribly sorry."

"No, no, not at all." I didn't want Brooke to feel he had to apologize to me. I had stormed into his house and started prying into his love life; I was the one who should be apologizing.

"But..." Brooke said suddenly, as though he'd just had a thought. "Ultimately, t' be together means many years, many tens of years, of being by each other's side."

"Oh... Right. That's true."

"But feelin's come and go. Love at first sight, infatuation, they don't last so long. I should think us and humans aren't so different on that count."

I found I couldn't think of anything to say. The whole discussion suddenly felt more serious.

"So if I may say so, Master, maybe it's not the most excitin' person you should look for. Maybe it's the one you feel most comfortable with."

"The one I feel most comfortable with..."

I see. That was a legitimately important consideration if you were going to marry someone.

"I remember how easy it felt t' be with my wife, long before she became, if you will, my wife. It's the same now. We're still comfortable with one another. So I confess it doesn't quite make sense to me t' measure how excited you are, as a way of choosin' a partner."

I didn't say anything for a moment.

"'Tis just my personal experience," Brooke said. "Please feel free t' ignore it."

"No... It means a lot to me, believe me. Thank you." I nodded at

Brooke, stood, and left the house.

I pondered for a while. The person I felt most comfortable with, huh? That was good advice. I guess being the only married person in the house really did give him a different perspective. Even so, I was honestly still confused. It wasn't like I had to choose one person and then instantly get married to them. But then again, even that was a sort of modern Japanese way of thinking about things—it might not be how it worked around here. People were considered to be adults at sixteen, and there might not be a clear demarcation between love and marriage.

What was I supposed to do?

I drifted back to my room and, yes, put my head in my hands again, still no answer in sight.

Chapter Three: Believed Forbidden

An unexpected visitor arrived first thing in the morning the day after Petralka had come to see me.

I had just finished getting dressed and was heading out of my room to breakfast when I heard voices in the front hall. I went to see what was going on and found Myusel and Cerise, greeting guests.

“Wh—What brings you here?” I asked of the unexpected party I saw standing there.

One of them, just like yesterday, was Petralka. She had sneaked out of the castle yesterday, and I had been sure Garius was going to find out, give her a scolding, and then ground her for a while... and that’s why she was unexpected.

But there was someone else I hadn’t counted on: Garius himself. He very rarely visited the mansion. Instead, we typically saw him when we went to the castle ourselves. If he was here, it was usually to accompany Petralka—and it looked like that was what he was doing today, too. In addition to the two of them, there were several knights who I assumed were bodyguards.

Finally, there was a diminutive girl with short hair and sort of grayish skin. Lauron Selioz, the dwarf. I knew her for her exceptional skill in controlling magical puppets—she spent most of her time at the castle, having been given the duty of puppeteering Petralka’s body double. Today, though, I didn’t see the double, but rather a burly-looking puppet standing behind her. I recognized it as one of the work dolls from the Guld workshop.

“Lauron, you’re here too? But why?”

She didn’t respond, but bowed slightly when she saw me. She still wasn’t very expressive, and it was a little hard to tell what she might be thinking.

“What’s going on?” The question came from Minori-san as she and Hikaru-san wandered into the foyer. Minori-san was in her uniform, and was even carrying her suitcase, the one with the concealed 9mm machine

pistol. Her cell phone was hooked into the mansion's security network, and she'd likely known about Garius and the others before I did. The weapon was probably inspired by the unusual fact that they'd brought a detachment of knights and even a work puppet.

What in the world was going on here? I looked at Lauron again—and then I realized.

"Shinichi. We must talk about—"

"I'm so s-sorry!" I exclaimed before Garius could finish, throwing my head down in a bow. "I know I should have sent Petralka home as soon as she showed up yesterday, but... I just... I couldn't..."

Lauron, as I said, was responsible for Petralka's body double. Meaning that while Petralka was away from the castle, she had to play the part of the empress. When Garius found out what had happened, he would have been angry not just at Petralka, but Lauron, too. He had obviously brought Lauron here to talk about yesterday's shenanigans. In a word, he was here to complain about Petralka's stopping by for a visit. Or so I had assumed.

But instead...

"No, that's a separate topic," he said brusquely. "And in that case, it is I who should apologize for the way Her Majesty foisted herself on you."

I blinked in surprise to find Garius turning the apologetic tables. So... this wasn't about Petralka's visit yesterday?

"Huh? But—"

Then why was he here? I looked at Petralka, baffled, but she stood there with her arms crossed and her chest puffed out. She certainly didn't look like someone who had just been given a dressing-down along with the keeper of her body double. "Garius claims he has some kind of business with you, Shinichi. And we have come along with him."

"You mean like extra content?"

"Do not put it that way." Petralka frowned.

It looked like whatever this was, it really *wasn't* about yesterday. "But what kind of business—" I was about to ask, but suddenly Minori-san practically shoved me aside.

"Don't tell me!" she exclaimed. "Could it be that you're here to join the battle for Shinichi-kun's heart?!"

"Hold it right there, you rotten—"

"If you are, I am *so* in your corner!"

"Stop trying to make this all about your *personal interests*!" I cried, as

our resident WAC stood with her eyes glittering and her hands joined in front of her chest as if in prayer.

"Battle...?" Garius said, perplexed.

"It's nothing."

"And if I win this battle, Shinichi is the prize?"

"I am not." I groaned. Why did he have to home straight in on the worst part of this conversation? "Minori-san's just off in her own little fantasy land—*as usual*—so please, don't pay any attention to her."

"Hmm."

"So what's this business you mentioned?"

"Well, as it happens, we found a certain something at the castle," Garius said, getting right to it.

"A certain something?"

"Yes. Namely, something known as 'Forbidden Armor.'" Garius's brow furrowed ever so slightly. "It has lain sealed away in a special storehouse, but—"

"Ooh! Forbidden... Sealed away..." This sounded pretty exciting. Was it —you know? One of those crazy armors with some outrageous power? Like, when you put it on, it controls your brain? Or gives you superhuman strength, but erases your memories in exchange? Or maybe the armor fuses with your skin so you can never take it off?! Maybe it was like the equipment of some last boss in an anime or manga: when he's defeated, he suddenly goes, "You have my thanks. Now I am at last free of this accursed armor," and turns out not to be such a terrible guy after all before everything ends up great?

"Certain circumstances have compelled us to begin investigating dangerous articles like this. This armor in particular, though, remains rife with mysteries."

"Really? What kind of mysteries?"

"For one thing, we are *told* it is armor, but it has the shape of no armor I've ever seen."

"Huh?"

Come again?

"It's difficult to explain—it's almost a sort of globe. At a glance, it's impossible to tell where a human limb could even fit in the thing. What's more, there are too many gaps in the records accompanying the armor to explain why it was sealed up to begin with. Much about it is, at best, rather

unclear."

"Geez, give me a break..."

Then again, this thing was sort of an antique. And we all know how easy it is to lose the instruction manual to something that keeps moving from owner to owner.

"However," Garius continued, "there are letters carved on the armor's surface that look familiar to me."

"Familiar letters? What kind?"

"They look much like the characters inscribed on the cover of a book Minori once lent me."

"One of *my* books?" Minori-san asked, pointing at herself in surprise.

Garius nodded briefly at her, then looked back at me: "I asked Her Majesty, and she confirmed that the letters look like those found in the books in your library, Shinichi. I came to ask for your opinion, thinking that perhaps the letters have some connection with Ja-panese."

"Letters....."

I knew Petralka was capable of reading Japanese at a grade-school level, so if it were simple enough, there would have been no need for them to come specifically to ask me about it. Maybe the letters were stylized, like something on the cover of a book, or maybe they involved difficult kanji or something. But how would anything like that get on some kind of "forbidden armor"? Maybe it only *looked* like Japanese, and didn't have anything to do with my world at all...

"In any event, I would like to begin by showing you the armor itself. Perhaps you and your friends will understand something that we could not."

"Okay... But just to be clear, we might not understand anything at all. In fact, I think that's more likely. The resemblance between these letters and Japanese might turn out to be complete coincidence."

"Certainly. We're prepared for that possibility. But you and your friends often have a different way of seeing things than we do, and we are hoping it might yield fresh insights here."

"Uh-huh..." So they were hoping for any kind of clue. It sounded like they weren't getting anywhere on their own. "And where is this armor?"

"In the carriage," Garius said, turning around. "There are five examples of the armor. Each is in its own wooden chest, but I must warn you not to touch any of them. Some magical items take prisoner anyone who touches them, you see. One may presume that, being armor, any effect does not

activate until the armor is equipped, but we can't be too careful. To that end, Lauron is here to use the puppet to get the armor out of the chests."

"So just to be clear, you're saying: look, don't touch; definitely don't accidentally put it on; and if we do, you're not responsible for what happens?" Hikaru-san said.

"More or less." Garius nodded.

Now we knew why Lauron was with them. I guess it made sense to take extra precautions when handling something called "forbidden armor."

"For the time being, we don't even understand how one puts on this so-called armor. If none of you have any objections, Lauron will now bring out the chests."

"Er, fine, I... I guess..."

We would just look at it. No problem, right? Surely it wasn't, like, a bacterial weapon that would infect us the moment they opened the lid—right? If it were, it would have gotten Garius and Lauron already.

That was my rationalization, anyway. But really, I was just very interested in this Forbidden Armor. An item by that name was practically a trope in manga, novels, anime, and video games—I never dreamed I would see the real thing.

"How about we start by taking them in the living room? It's the largest space in the house."

"Very well. Lauron..."

"Yes, sir." Lauron, and the puppet standing behind her, began to move.

I headed for the carriage with Lauron-san. It was her puppet who would be doing all the carrying, of course. The problem was, not only was the puppet very large, but whatever this cargo was, it apparently wasn't small itself. They would need a large entrance and hallway through which to bring the chests, and I was to help them find it. I trailed along behind Lauron-san, mentally reviewing various entrances and passageways.

"Is this it...?" I asked as we arrived.

"Yes. Please be careful not to touch it," Lauron-san said as several wooden chests were lowered one by one from the carriage. There were five of them, all identical in size. They were so large, in fact, that I thought someone my size could have climbed inside and closed the lid. As for what

they weighed, I couldn't tell, but probably enough that a full-grown man would find them hard to lift. All of the boxes were blackened with age, the nails rusting: they had obviously been around for a long time.

Once Lauron-san had unloaded them all, she had the puppet pick one of them up. I could hear the box groan with the strain.

"This way, please." I started off at a walk, Lauron-san behind me now. We had opened both doors of the service entrance, and went into the house that way. The front door was bigger, but the foyer was home to several furnishings and decorations that seemed likely to be hazardous for the puppet, so I decided to bring them around the back way.

"Ahem. Are you quite all right?" I asked, feeling some trepidation, but Lauron-san replied, "I'm fine."

The source of my concern was the ongoing complaint from the wood of the box the puppet was carrying. Maybe the contents were heavy, or maybe the wood was in poor shape, or maybe the puppet was just grasping it too hard... In any event, I wondered if it might not be best to stop and adjust the thing's grip. That was just my feeling, though. Lauron-san didn't seem unduly disturbed. She was the specialist when it came to controlling these puppets, and it wasn't my place to tell her how to do her job.

And so I led them past the kitchen, toward the living room. That was when I heard my name: "Myusel~~!" And shambling down the corridor toward us came... Elvia-san. "Ain't breakfast ready yet?"

"Oh! I'm sorry..." The sudden visit from Her Majesty and Minister Cordobal had caused me to put my breakfast preparations on hold. "I'm afraid I have to help get this chest to the living room first."

"Aw, but I'm soooo hungry..." Elvia-san did indeed sound downright pathetic.

After Her Majesty's declaration the previous evening that "a woman's fiftieth kilo is mere self-indulgence," Elvia-san had declared that she was "cutting down" and left the room before she had eaten half her dinner. Then, it seemed, she spent the hours until almost dawn doing laps around the nearby area. It certainly would make a person hungry.

"Please hang on just a little longer," I said.

"But I'm *dying*," she said. Then her eyes lit on the box in the puppet's hands. "So all you need's to get this thing to the living room?"

"I'm sorry...?"

"If this box gets to that room, you go back to making breakfast, right?"

“Well, yes, but... er, Elvia-san?”

“All right, I’m on it! Let’s get you back to breakfast duty, Myusel!” And then, before I could stop her, Elvia-san grabbed the box from the puppet. She was so strong, she could easily carry the box all by herself, and faster than Lauron-san’s doll. The puppet really did look large and ungainly.

“Oh—!”

“No, don’t—!”

My voice and Lauron-san’s sounded at almost the same time, and the wooden box creaked ever louder. An instant later—

“Huh?!”

Perhaps the box really had been under too much strain, or perhaps something had simply come loose—whatever the reason, the chest flew apart in Elvia-san’s hands.

“Ohh...!”

The contents of the box—the “forbidden armor” Minister Cordobal had described—fell out and went rolling on the floor. It looked like a round, smooth lump, just big enough to put your arms around. Instinctively, I reached out to stop it from rolling away.

Reached out with my hand.

After all those warnings not to touch it. After they had brought in a puppeteering expert specifically so no one would have to.

I shivered. I felt a strange sensation in my fingertips. The surface, which I had taken to be steel, was hard and smooth, but lacked the chill of metal. It wasn’t warm either, though—it was a very odd feeling. They kept saying it was armor; maybe it was made from something other than metal, the way hard leather armor was.

“Wha—?”

Then, the lump split apart. It swallowed my right hand, like the jaws of some beast.

“Oh—!”

I tried to pull my hand away, but it was stuck fast. Worse, the lump had proceeded to swallow my arm. In a flash, it had my right arm up to the shoulder—then, shifting shape, the lump attached itself to my back and covered my shoulders, then my chest, and finally my legs.

Chik. Chik-chik-chik-chik-chik.

With a sound like a chittering insect, the former sphere attached itself to my body, covering my arms, legs, and torso in shapes much like those of Lauron-san’s puppet—in fact, even more angular. I was ensconced in something like a bubble, with no idea where it had come from.

“Myusel?!” Elvia-san exclaimed in shock. Her voice somehow sounded slightly different from usual—was it because of the bubble? I realized that perhaps it was more of a transparent membrane.

Everything up to this point had truly happened in the blink of an eye. I discovered that my arms were fully exposed, but my legs had something like greaves on them. And none of it showed any sign of coming off again. Maybe even more surprising, I realized I was no longer in my maid uniform, but a thin, form-fitting outfit of some kind.

Minister Cordobal’s words echoed in my mind: *forbidden armor.*

So I was...

“Myusel!!” Elvia-san grabbed my hand—or rather, the armor surrounding my hand. But: “Huh?”

That was the only sound she made before she went tumbling backwards through the air.

We sat in the living room and waited for this “forbidden armor” to arrive. “We” included me, Petralka, Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and Garius. The knights who had come along as bodyguards were stationed in the next room. We thought that would be best, because it would give us the most space to deal with this forbidden armor, whatever it was. If anything happened, the knights could be here in an instant.

And so I sat there, scratching my cheek. “So, uh... Petralka.” I didn’t need a mirror to know my face was bright red.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Aren’t you a little, uh... close to me?”

“Are we? Th-This is where we always sit,” Petralka said, but her cheeks were flushed, too.

When we had all sat down on the sofas, Petralka had plopped herself next to me as if it were the most natural thing in the world. There was lots of open space, but she squeezed as close to me as she could. She stopped short of cuddling up, but her leg was pressed right against mine, and I could feel the softness and warmth of her body. I was feeling—maybe not embarrassed, exactly, but kind of antsy.

Heck, she had sat on my *knees* before, so really, this was nothing. Of course, back then, I didn’t know anything about her being in love with me, if she even was. But now?

“D-Do not pay it any mind. We c-certainly aren’t.” Petralka pointedly looked away from me. Her silver hair fluttered as she turned her head—and revealed her ears, which were even redder than her face. And there was that skin, the little stretch from just behind her ears, down her neck—the delicate curve was undeniably alluring, even kind of... sexy...!

Was this it? Was this that “new side” Hikaru-san had talked about?! This new sexiness of Petralka’s had my heart on overboost, and I felt like it was going to explode! I hoped she couldn’t feel it pounding away in my chest. *Arrgh, where does an omnipotent imperial ruler get off being so dang cute?!*

But while I was busy losing my mind with moe, Hikaru-san apparently had a thought. “I wonder what Myusel and Elvia would think,” he mused, “if they saw *this*.”

“G-Geez, Hikaru-san!”

Don’t start that again!

“I should take a picture. I bet I could blackmail you for the rest of your life, Shinichi-san.”

“Huh. G-Good point.” That was when I realized Minori-san, who for some reason was nodding vigorously, had a camera-pen tucked into her breast pocket. Ugh, so had she *already* taken a picture?!

“Speaking of Myusel,” Minori-san said in an effort to distract me, “she and Lauron sure are taking their time.”

“Now that you mention it...”

They were just going outside to get something from the carriage. I wouldn’t have expected it to take so long. Even if they had to go really carefully, I assumed it wouldn’t take more than five minutes or so. Or

maybe that puppet was even slower than it looked?

"Think we should go check on them?" Hikaru-san said, standing up from the sofa.

BOOM.

"Uh...?"

That was when we heard what sounded like an explosion—I mean, you could practically have put a "*B-O-O-M*" sound effect over it.

I flinched, startled. An explosion was bad enough, but what really bothered me was that it sounded very, very close. This wasn't some distant echo. It seemed as if it had come from just near the mansion. As if to prove my point, a vase in the living room shivered, shaking several petals from the flowers it was holding.

So we were close enough to feel the shock wave. What if it had come from *inside* the mansion?

Garius and Minori-san stood up almost simultaneously. Minori-san grabbed the 9mm machine pistol from the suitcase at her feet, while Garius put a hand on his sword. Almost as if they had rehearsed it, each of them took up a position, Minori-san by me, Garius by Petralka, and then they watched the entrance to the room.

"What's going on? Report!" Garius shouted, presumably to the knights nearby.

"Wh-What was that?" Petralka asked, clinging to my arm.

"Not sure..." I said.

Minori-san and Garius both seemed to be operating on the assumption that whatever had caused the blast, it was an enemy, but I didn't think that was very likely. If Bahairam or whoever else was planning to attack my house, they could have chosen a way better time to do it. Why deliberately strike when a minister was here with a squadron of armed knights?

Unless they weren't after me or the house—but Petralka. As many knights as we had here, it was still less than they had at the castle, making this the better target. But that still left the question of how they would have known Petralka would be here today. The earliest she could have decided to come would have been the night before, not enough time to plan and execute an entire ambush.

Then there was the fact that Minori-san's cell phone hadn't gone off. The various sensors around our mansion had even detected the Eleamachi

Tribe—trained killers from Bahairam who possessed natural abilities practically equivalent to active camo. But whatever caused that explosion hadn't so much as tripped an alarm. Which all led to just one conclusion...

"Eeyikes!"

Suddenly, the door to the living room came flying off. I don't mean it flew open. I mean it literally burst off its hinges. And it was accompanied by... one of the knights of the royal guard?

"Wha...?"

Even Garius looked surprised when he saw the knight at his feet, clanking faintly as he shifted. To send a grown man flying was hard enough—but an armed knight in full equipment probably weighed something in the neighborhood of a hundred kilograms. Not to mention the stopping power of the door he'd just gone through. That must've been some explosion.

I looked again, and this time I noticed the huge dent in the chest of the knight's armor. If he was especially unlucky, he might even have some broken bones.

One thing was clear: this was bad. I didn't know exactly why, but it definitely was.

"Garius-san," I said, eyeing our now doorless entryway and shifting so Petralka was sort of behind me. "I think this is—the thing."

"*Thing*?" he said, but my guess was he had put the pieces together, too.

It was unlikely to be an attack by a third party. So whoever—or whatever—had sent the knight sprawling had to have come from inside the house. From inside a box brought from a nearby carriage, say.

"The forbidden armor," I said.

"One supposes," Garius replied, nodding darkly.

It almost had to be. That was the explanation that made the most sense.

We were talking about an ancient, cursed magical item. If it was "forbidden," that had to be because it was dangerous. Maybe, for example, it could move on its own and attack people. Maybe something had caused one of the suits of forbidden armor to awaken and begin its dark work.

Then Hikaru-san said, "Do you hear something? It's like... a high-pitched jet engine noise..."

Now that he mentioned it, I did. Kind of a "*fwoooo*," an awful lot like a jet or helicopter sounds when its engine revs up for a landing. Not very bassy or anything, but a mechanical noise that definitely said "power."

"It's coming," Garius said, and drew his sword.

In the space where our door used to be, there appeared a bizarre shape. The first thing I could make out looked like... an arm. The roughest, meanest arm you ever saw. The hand, or what I thought was the hand, looked as big as a park bench. You wouldn't want to get squeezed by that... or punched by it.

Then the elbow appeared, and finally the shoulder, and then.....

"Huh?" I said stupidly.

"Myusel...?" Petralka, peeking over my shoulder to see this "forbidden armor," said from behind me.

She was right. Standing there was... Myusel.

But "standing" wasn't quite the right word. She looked nearly crucified on the armor, like it was the armor that was standing, and she was sort of dangling from it. Her legs were covered up to the knees by armored pieces, but much of the rest of her body was exposed. From her legs, the armor wrapped around behind her like some kind of lurking ghost. From her sides, pushing her shoulders forward, extended two things that definitely looked like robot arms; they seemed to be connected to her arms and to move in concert with them. Maybe the best equivalent I could think of would be the Power Loader from *Alie*s*. This thing looked less like armor than like heavy machinery that you wore on your back.

On closer inspection, though, I noticed that the parts of Myusel I could see looked slightly distorted. And everything about her seemed a little pale, like she was covered by something translucent. She looked vulnerable in there, but the armor probably had some sort of shielding. It wasn't as obvious as glass or plastic, though—maybe it was more like a mirage, incorporeal—or like a gravitational field.

Whatever the case...

"Is that... the forbidden armor?"

It looked less like armor and more like something created by an otaku: Armored Girl, or MS Girl, or some kind of weapon anthropomorphized into an adorable young girl—a classic powered suit! Especially the way the chest and hips and everything round was exposed! She was practically naked! O, great Armored Girl!

...No, wait.

What the heck was that thing?! As gadgets went, it sure looked out of place in a fantasy setting.

"Myusel, what in the world...?"

“I—I don’t know, sir...!” Myusel said, sounding as if she might cry.

“It must be the forbidden armor!” Garius said, his face grim, and that was when I knew for sure that whatever else that thing was, it was definitely the dangerous, off-limits, absolutely-do-not-touch item he had brought from the castle storehouses. He had said it didn’t look anything like armor, and now I knew what he meant. It didn’t even have a helmet or chest plate.

“Th-The wooden box broke, and this came out... And I, I t-touched it, and it just...! And I can’t get it off...! Elvia-san and Lauron-san, they...!”

“Elvia? Lauron? Did you do something to them?” I pressed, but Myusel shook her head in a sort of panic.

“It—It wasn’t me! My body moved on its own...! Me, I—I—!”

Her twintails waved back and forth almost audibly. Her chest was bouncing, too, so that I inadvertently found my eyes pinned to it. It wasn’t as large as Elvia’s, but it was still generous, and so soft-looking, and—hey, let’s get our priorities straight, okay?

“Elvia-san, I—”

As Myusel vehemently protested her innocence, I saw something just in front of her face. In the air in front of her—or rather, I guess, on the transparent screen surrounding her—characters quickly appeared and disappeared, scrolling through empty space. What were they? They were backwards, so I couldn’t make them out very easily, but they looked a bit like an alphabet...

“Elvia-san, I—I’ve actually always thought she was in the way!”

“...Huh?”

What had Myusel just said?

Surprised as I was to hear Myusel say something so out of character, I was no more surprised than Myusel herself. She quickly slapped her hands over her mouth—or tried to, producing a shower of sparks from the metal gloves encasing them.

“In the way? You mean...”

“N-No, I don’t...” Myusel shook her head. But in spite of the emphatic gesture, she went on speaking fluently: “...*not* mean it! She gets to slobber all over you because of some song and dance about the moon, Shinichi-sama, and I can’t stand it! It’s not fair! When I work so hard to restrain myself!”

“M-Myusel?”

The rest of us stood dumbfounded. We had never heard her express herself so directly, so bluntly. And yet her expression—she looked like she was about to burst into tears—was the complete opposite of what was coming out of her mouth. She herself couldn't seem to believe what she was saying.

When they said this armor was cursed, is this what they meant? Did it make the wearer say things they didn't mean—or maybe even things they meant, but would never say themselves?

Sheesh, I could see why it ended up forbidden.

But that still left—

"Lauron. What happened to her?" Garius demanded, his face still stern and dark.

"She attacked me with her stupid puppet, so I took care of her! Elvia-san, too!— I d-didn't mean to, my body just moved on its own...!" Myusel went on shaking her head, denying every other thing she said.

I assumed that, in an effort to help the trapped Myusel, Elvia, Lauron, and Lauron's puppet had attempted to remove the armor by force, and that the armor had counterattacked. The story was probably the same for the knight who had come flying through our door. There was a distinct possibility that the rest of the royal guard had met the same fate.

Could this go on? I was especially worried about Elvia and Lauron, but just then—

"Sh-Shinichi-sama..." Elvia arrived in the room, carried on Lauron's back—or, well, because of the height difference, more like half-dragged. She looked like she had been worked over pretty good, but she was still alive and kicking. Lauron looked unharmed; probably because it was the puppet, and not her, who had borne the brunt of the suit's counterattack.

Huh? But that meant...

"If we don't attack it, it won't attack us...?" Garius, who had evidently had the same thought as me, mumbled.

"Looks that way," Minori-san said, lowering her pistol.

If the suit were intent on attacking anyone and everyone within range, then it would have roughed up Lauron when it had the chance, not to mention the knight groaning on the floor near us, not to mention all of us in the room right then.

"This suggests that the impetus for the prohibition on this armor is the unrestrained speech," Garius said.

“Yeah, having your innermost feelings come pouring out is a scary thing,” Minori-san said. She nodded at him.

Uh. Did they really think that was the main issue?

“Myusel says she can’t take it off. That might be a problem eventually,” Hikaru-san said. “I mean, at this rate, she’ll never be able to go to the bathroom again...”

“Now *that’s* scary!” Minori-san said, wringing her hands.

“Is that *really* what bothers you the most?!” I interjected.

“Shinichi-kun, it won’t do to make light of a young woman’s toilet plight. Do you know why at Comiket and every other big event, the guys’ restroom is always practically empty, while the girls’ has a line that seems to go around the block?”

“Uh, not as such...”

Seeing as I was a *boy* and all.

Even if we could figure out how to handle the toilet situation, being unable to take the armor off would definitely be an inconvenience. And constantly spewing your own darkest thoughts wasn’t super great, either.

Hmm. What to do.

Thinking that maybe a closer look at the armor would be a good place to start, I was about to take a step forward—when someone pulled on my arm and stopped me.

“Petralka?” I turned around to find the empress hanging off my arm, holding me back with all her strength. It looked like she hadn’t moved since I shifted to put her behind me. “Sorry, but maybe you could let me—”

“Get away from Shinichi-sama!” Myusel demanded the very next second.

All of us looked at her in shock. The only one who was anywhere near me right now was Petralka. That made it pretty clear who Myusel was speaking to.

Then she went a step further. Tearfully, but also assertively, she declared, “Enemy presence detected. Eliminating!” The jet-engine whine increased again, and she floated straight towards us. Evidently, to “eliminate” Petralka.

“Just—whaaaaaaat?!”

“H-Halt! Stop right there!”

At that moment, two royal guards came into the room, staggering slightly. Both had dents and chips in their armor, suggesting they had

already tangled with the power suit once, but it was their duty to put their lives on the line for Her Majesty, and they launched themselves at Myusel without hesitation or fear.

But she—or rather, the armor—gave one dismissive sweep of its huge arm and launched them through the air, until they slammed against a wall. This was no good. That thing was exponentially more powerful than anything we had. Saying it was like a child fighting a grown adult would have been an understatement—we were like fairies attacking a mythical Titan.

This was very bad. Whatever Myusel may or may not have really meant, she had threatened to "eliminate" Petralka. She could try to blame the armor, but the fact remained that a half-elf maid had threatened the life of the absolute monarch of the Empire. If she harmed a hair on Petralka's head—voluntarily or not—somebody would have to take responsibility...

"Here's where we run!" I exclaimed, and swept Petralka up in my arms.

"Wha?! Eep!" she yelped.

It looked like Garius and Minori-san, along with Lauron and Elvia, intended to try to stop Myusel, so that would buy us some time.

Alright then...

"*Ia redoro imu shigamu reuobu dona euruto uoi, diifurisu ekamu toshifu dona ekirutsu taato imene!*" I intoned, although it took me a few false starts. It meant "With True Words and my magic power I command thee, sprites of the wind, form a fist and smite my enemy!"

I hesitated for a moment—but this was an emergency. I didn't have a choice. I held tight to Petralka as I stuck out my right palm toward a window facing the front yard. "*Tifu Murottsu!*"

I unleashed the offensive magic with as much power as I could muster. The glass shattered. I jumped through the now-vacant window and made for the yard. I was glad we were on the first floor. If we had been up a level, there might have been no way out.

Anyway, we had to run. Had to escape.

But where?

I was thinking desperately when I felt Petralka's arms squeeze my neck. "Shinichi...!"

Ahhhhh. I was already carrying her in my arms, but with her squeezing, squeezing like that, like that, I might... I was...! Then Petralka looked at me with those huge, emerald eyes and said...

“We knew fifty kilos was an indulgence!”

“Are you still stuck on that?!”

Okay, so it *was* because Petralka was so light that even a wimp like me was able to pick her up and run! And notwithstanding Petralka’s somewhat out-of-place satisfaction and my completely out-of-place rejoinder, that was what I did.

Shinichi-kun leaped out the window with the empress in his arms—and Myusel, still trapped in the forbidden armor, followed him. Minister Cordobal headed around to the front door, leaving me, Elvia, Hikaru-kun, Lauron, and a few groaning knights in the living room.

“Hikaru-kun, Lauron, take a look at the royal guards. Help them out of their armor if you can. Broken shoulders or arms we can deal with later, but if anyone has a broken collarbone, it could puncture a lung.”

“Right, I’m on it.”

“Understood.”

They both nodded.

“I’m going after Shinichi-kun,” I said, and then I left the room. Instead of just barreling straight after him, I thought I would have better luck coming around from the opposite direction from Minister Cordobal; we might be able to catch Myusel in a pincers movement. The fact was, I didn’t think a sword or even my 9mm was going to stop that armor, which looked like it had jumped out of the pages of some manga, or come alive from an anime. But Myusel was trapped inside it, and that meant I couldn’t just open up with an anti-personnel weapon like a 110mm LAM. I switched the safety on my weapon to AUTO and headed around the back of the house.

“Minori-sama!” Elvia, moving unsteadily, caught up with me.

“What do you think you’re doing? You’ve already been on the losing end of a fight with that forbidden armor. You shouldn’t be running around. If you have any internal injuries—”

“It’s my fault for breakin’ the box...”

Ahh. Elvia hadn’t been there when Minister Cordobal cautioned the rest of us about the armor, so she hadn’t known how dangerous it was. She must have somehow gotten her hands on it while Lauron was trying to bring it to us.

I pulled out my phone as I jogged alongside Elvia. We had a wired network running between the mansion and the garrison, so I could communicate with the JSDF via my phone, which was hooked in by wireless LAN. I could get in touch with Captain Satou and the others there, get them to bring a Type-89, or an M-24 sniper rifle. The forbidden armor might be tough, but it was always possible we could find a weak point. And if we could hit it with pinpoint accuracy, we might be able to render the armor harmless without killing Myusel. For that, we would need a very precise weapon. Something better than a handheld pistol, or a machine gun that sprayed bullets.

"Hrgh!" Beside me, Elvia suddenly doubled over. Had she tripped?

I knew she needed rest. Normally, her sense of balance was almost impossible to upset, but the forbidden armor must have really done a number on her, because now she was stumbling in a sort of diagonal, looking into the distance...

"Hey, Elvia!"

"Buh?"

I was too late. Trying to get her balance back, Elvia reflexively reached out for the wooden box right nearby.

"Wha-huh?!"

I guess the lid had come loose when it was taken down from the carriage, or maybe it had shaken free with the other forbidden armor running around. Whatever the case, Elvia's hand slipped right into the opening as if springing a trap. Her face froze.

She fell down, hard. Her hand, still trapped in the box, flipped the whole thing over.

"Elvia, are you o—"

Then I saw it, and the words died in my throat. A ball—there was no other word for it—rolled out of the box. Then it suddenly split in two, like a giant pair of jaws, and swallowed Elvia's whole body.

"Elvia!"

This had to be—yes, I knew what was happening.

"Ahhhhhhh!" Elvia shouted.

The "ball" split apart, pieces sliding out even as Elvia's clothes appeared to melt away. In their place, a kind of red bodysuit enveloped her from the neck down.

"What on earth...?" I said vacantly, as the second suit of forbidden

armor wrapped itself around Elvia.

I went as fast as I could, Petralka in my arms. I ran desperately—around the house. I'm sure it would have looked completely stupid to anyone watching me. Just circling the same place like a chicken with its head cut off. Where was that going to get me? But it was really the only option left to me by the terrain around the mansion.

My house, see, was built adjacent to a big forest near the Eldant capital. The grounds of the mansion itself were neatly tended by Brooke, but take one step outside the property and it was all weeds and uncut grass as far as the eye could see. I wouldn't be able to go very fast at all trying to run through that; I might even trip and fall. So in an effort to avoid that possibility, I had to stick to the inside of the property line.

There was always the path out the front door, the one that led to the capital—it was paved with stones and relatively well-kept, but at the moment several of Garius's carriages were parked on it, and I would have had to work my way around them. The bird-drawn conveyances were essentially a big, feathery roadblock.

Then there was the little fact that Myusel was behind me in a powered exoskeleton. I felt like the moment I slowed my pace, she would catch up to me.

Solution? Dash in circles around the mansion like a chicken with its head cut off.

"Faster, Shinichi, faster!"

"I'm going—as fast—as I can...!"

I was a former shut-in, not a former gym rat, and I didn't have the strength or the explosive power for this. I had hardly been running for five minutes, but my breath was already coming in gasps, and my heart felt like it might burst. Not to mention I was carrying another person, even if she was relatively light...

"Come—to think of it—Petral—ka..."

"Hm?"

"Wouldn't it be—faster—if you ran—yourself?"

It was very, very late to be thinking of this, but in between gulping breaths I managed to suggest this new strategy. Petralka, though, adopted a

pouty expression and looked away.

"...We refuse."

"What? But...?"

"We said, we refuse! Keep running!"

She could order me around all she wanted, but I was close to my limit... I groaned, but continued my mad dash. I was just rounding a corner of the house when—

"Huh?"

There was the forbidden armor. But how?! How could it be here?! I came to a halt so quickly that my shoes kicked up dirt, and was about to go running the other way when—I stopped.

As I turned around, I saw Myusel in her forbidden armor behind me.

"There's another one?!"

Now I saw that hanging from the torso of this new suit of armor was Elvia. Where Myusel's armor had blue highlights all over, on Elvia's they were red.

"But *why*?!" I wailed.

The colors may have been different, but Elvia was now just as much a "mecha girl" as Myusel. Her usual midriff-exposing white tube top was gone, replaced with a full-body leotard—it didn't show nearly as much skin, but it did highlight her curves to much better effect, giving the whole thing a fresh—no, not the time!

Elvia looked shaken—she had probably put the armor on by accident, just like Myusel—but in spite of that, her arms and legs were moving, and she was coming our way. By now it was pretty clear that the forbidden armor acted based on the wearer's most deeply buried feelings. And not long before, Elvia had been fighting over me just like Myusel. Which meant that the target of her attack had to be Petralka.

She was truly the "tiger in front," Myusel the "wolf behind."

"Shinichi-kun, watch o—" Minori-san rounded the house from Elvia's side, shouting, but it was already too late.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What am I supposed to d-d-d-d-do?!"

"Run!"

"There's nowhere *to* run!"

It was a perfect pincers movement, and I was exhausted, anyway. And then...

""Shinichi-sama!!" Myusel and Elvia shouted at almost the same time

—and then they both charged madly.

“Heek...?!”

I’m gonna be crushed!

With nowhere to run, I instinctively hugged Petralka tight and ducked down. There was an earsplitting clang of metal just over my head.

Slowly, fearfully, I looked up, and discovered Myusel’s and Elvia’s suits just above us, their hands locked together. It was like we were playing a very surreal version of London Bridge, and we were under the bridge.

Oh, I see.

Myusel and Elvia were *both* fighting over me. Myusel had gotten first blood, so to speak, on Elvia, and it made sense that Elvia might now consider her the biggest threat.

“U-Um, Elvia-san, please let go...!”

“You... let go... first, Myusel...!”

There was an awful scraping sound as they leaned into each other. For sheer strength, Elvia obviously had the upper hand, but when they each had a suit of powered armor, it looked like the contest was a lot closer to even.

“N-Now’s our chance!” Still holding Petralka, I sort of rolled out from between Myusel and Elvia. When we got to our feet, I wasn’t carrying Petralka in my arms anymore, but I had a firm grip on her hand, and pulled her along as we ran toward Minori-san.

“”“Shinichi-sama!””

Myusel and Elvia broke up their shoving contest and set off after me again. This was bad. I was right back where I had started, except this time there were two people chasing me!

“What are we supposed to do about this, Minori-san?!”

“I’ve already contacted the garrison, they should be bringing us a sniper rifle or something soon,” Minori-san said, jogging alongside me. “Though whether it’ll be here in time, I’m not sure...”

“A sniper rifle... Wait. Are we going to shoot Myusel and Elvia?”

“You think we can stop them without help?”

“No, I don’t, but—!”

“I’m not suggesting we use a rocket launcher or something. I’m hoping a rifle would allow us to hit a weak point, or at worst, injure instead of kill them. I don’t want to shoot those girls any more than you do, but I can’t think of anything else.” Minori-san looked genuinely disturbed.

She was right, a gun might give us the chance to take it easy on them,

in some sense. There was some question about whether a pistol or other small arm would even have any effect on the forbidden armor. Those things looked a lot like powered exoskeletons from some anime or manga, and I had to assume they were pretty sturdy. Those transparent coverings seemed likely to be screens of some kind, or even force fields, and I got the distinct impression they would stop a bullet. That sort of thing was, like, the bare minimum requirement for a mecha girl.

"I'm going to try to at least buy you some time—you run on ahead with Her Majesty." Then Minori-san stopped and drew her 9mm pistol. "Hold it right there! Stop or I'll shoot!"

She probably knew the warning was pointless, but she gave it anyway. Then she fired a few shots into the ground near the girls' feet, as a warning.

I heard the pistol bark behind me, again and again. Little plumes of smoke dotted the ground in front of Myusel and Elvia. The two of them, though, didn't seem bothered. Well, to be fair, the girls, inside the suits, looked very scared, but the suits themselves didn't so much as slow down. In fact...

""Hostile activity detected. Deactivating weapon safeties,"" Myusel and Elvia intoned together.

"Minori-san!" I stopped in spite of myself and shouted. "Run aw—huh?"

A second later, Myusel and Elvia—or really, their forbidden armors—stuck out their right arms and launched something.

There was a *bam!* I could feel in the pit of my stomach, and then the ground split, and Minori-san's small form was thrown through the air.

"Minori-saaan!" I shouted, but Minori-san was... *not* slammed mercilessly into the ground. She twisted in midair and landed on her feet, bracing herself with one hand before pushing herself up again. What was she, an acrobat? I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. I knew what an experienced martial artist she was.

For a second, I thought maybe the suits had fired cannons, but I was wrong. They hadn't used a firearm at all, but...

"Rocket hammers?"

Each of the suits had launched something with a rope or wire attached to it. The thing the wire was attached to appeared to be a globe, now half buried in the earth. Then each of the suits gave a tug, and the globes jumped backwards: the forbidden armors had clearly fired them. The things were

shaped like cannonballs, and they were about as big around as a man’s fist.

So these things got shot out as if from a cannon, but the ammunition wasn't lost after one round. It could probably be fired multiple times. Infinite ammo, if you will. And probably more destructive than Minori-san's gun. If one of those connected with a human body, it would tear it apart.

"What are you doing?! Run away!" Minori-san said, starting to run herself. I quickly set off again, still pulling Petralka by the hand.

Boom! There was that sound again. This time it was Petralka and me who were tossed into the air. Not as high as Minori-san had been; I think I only made it about a meter before coming down, largely unharmed. But Petralka—

"Eeeeeeek!"

"Petralka!"

She was lighter than me, and although we had been thrown the same short distance, she tumbled along the ground for several meters more.

"Wait..."

She was tumbling right towards a wooden box. Minori-san and I watched in horror as she slammed into it, bursting it apart.

No. No, no, no. That can't be what I... This is too much!

"P-Petralka...?" I said timidly, as she sat up, woozy, from among the remains of the box.

I saw immediately that she was wearing the white third suit of forbidden armor.

Her Majesty and Minister Garius en Cordobal had already departed for Shinichi-dono's mansion, leaving me to look after the castle, when the witch in charge of our special storehouses came up to me in a veritable panic.

"Prime Minister Zahar, please forgive the interruption—we have found it!"

The witch was speaking of the archives just nearby—specifically, of written records that had been discovered regarding the forbidden armor. As the records themselves were paperwork, and not a magical item, they had been stored separately from the armor, and their existence had gone forgotten. The keeper of the archives had noticed a four-digit number

scrawled on the wooden boxes containing the armor, and had determined that it must be a classification and location code for the archives, which led to the discovery of these records.

"And? What did they say? Are there any hints, any clues?"

"Yes, Prime Minister." She walked up to my desk and set the papers in front of me. She proceeded to give me the gist of them, and a rather shocking report it was. The forbidden armor, it seemed, "possessed" those so careless as to touch it—but only women, or so the records said. Men could handle the armor safely.

The term "possess" seemed to imply that women who touched the armor would not only be enveloped by it, but that it would influence their words and actions. Specifically, that desires and impulses from the deepest depths of her heart would come to the surface. This didn't seem terribly dangerous as far as it went—except that the young woman ensconced in the forbidden armor couldn't control the manifestation of these impulses. The result would be a young woman, terrified because she was possessed by an unfamiliar magical item, attacking everyone around her like a wild animal, on a rampage she was powerless to control.

Evidently, it was possible to gain some measure of agency over the suit if one remained calm enough—it seemed one woman had succeeded in removing the armor with her own hands, though only after having razed an entire town—but exactly how calm one had to be to exert this agency was as yet unclear. The records, I was told, said only that if anxiety exceeded a certain threshold, it would be impossible to take the armor off.

All this left me with a question, though: Why in the world had this armor been created in the first place? Cursed items were frequently devised with the intention that they would be used not by the one who made them, but by some enemy, inviting the foe to destruction. But this armor seemed altogether too roundabout a way to entrap an unsuspecting enemy. If that was what it was for, why not have the armor simply go berserk the moment it was equipped? Why have its actions bear no connection at all to the woman inside? Why leave the woman safe?

For that matter, if chaos was the intention, why limit it to women at all?

Magical items have creators, and creators have plans. The plans may not always work, but one would hardly bother to finish an item if it was completely divorced from what its creator wanted.

Whatever the case, there was still too much guesswork, too many things

we didn't know. It had clearly been the right choice to shut those things up in the castle storehouse; they were too dangerous to do otherwise.

But then, too...

"Hrm?" I grunted, stroking my beard absently. "Well, Garius-dono... Surely he wouldn't..."

There were a great many women at Shinichi-dono's house. Presently, that included Her Majesty the Empress, and even young Lauron, the puppeteer Garius-dono had taken along to handle the cargo. It seemed to me that all this simply meant a greater probability of an "accident" occurring...

"Perhaps it was wrong of us to take the armor to Shinichi-dono's home," I mused.

It was too late for regrets, however. I ordered the witch to dispatch a message to Shinichi-dono's mansion immediately.

There was another air-shaking *boom*. Probably. I thought. It was the sound of a clenched fist tearing through the atmosphere. It moved so fast that you could hear it, or at least feel like you heard it. The steel "hand" was about to bury itself in its enemy.

Myusel's forbidden armor was attacking Petralka. We already knew how powerful these suits were from Myusel's encounter with the royal guard. If the diminutive Petralka took a direct hit, she could easily be killed. It was only barely a hand, but a speeding fist was more dangerous than any inexpertly wielded sword.

I reeled as the metal claws raked across Petralka's face.

But there was no sound of impact—instead, an instant later, Petralka sort of shimmered from side to side—and disappeared. Myusel hadn't hit her at all. It had only been an afterimage.

But wait... An afterimage implied—just to be clear what we were saying here—that Petralka and her entire body had moved fast enough to leave such an optical illusion. Was that even possible?

What was with this hyper battle?! Was this *Shura ** Mon*?! *Grappl***?! Or were they going to go Super S**yan? Was there going to be a second transformation stage?!

My head spun with confusion as in front of me, girls wearing "forbidden armor"—Myusel, Elvia, and even Petralka—fought relentlessly.

"*You* lot..." Petralka growled, circling around Myusel and lashing out with her "arm" in a sort of counterattack. There was another rush of air, no less impressive than the one from Myusel's blow. It was a blitz. "...are always, always, always with Shinichi all the time! We are left out!"

"Complain all you want, Your Majesty!" Myusel, leaving an afterimage of her own, dodged half of Petralka's blows, and caught the other half with her own arm... Or anyway, that's what it looked like. I thought. It happened so fast, I wasn't really sure. "But Shinichi-sama is always so nice to you! Holding you! Carrying you around! I want him to carry *me* like that!"

"You can't carry a girl who weighs more than fifty kilos! A woman's fiftieth kilogram is an indulgence!"

"You wanna know why you're so light, Your Majesty? Take a look at your chest!"

"Gnnraaahhh!! Now you have truly gone too far!"

The "arms" crossed and crossed again, so hard and so fast that you could almost put a *bo-o-o-ong* sound effect over them. The physical exchange was amazing enough, but the dialogue—I mean, they weren't pulling their punches, physically *or* verbally. It seemed like a sorta weird conversation to be having during a superhuman battle to the death, though.

Was this... Was this... where we learned that war was truly hell? (Note: don't really think so.)

"No fair! *No fair*!" Elvia came howling down from overhead. Myusel and Petralka dove aside, and Elvia slammed into the space between them. A huge flying kick. Her metal-clad leg hit the ground with a terrific *boom!*, throwing up dust and dirt.

Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa*!*

Elvia, or rather her forbidden armor, sank into the ground up to her ankle, at which point Myusel and Petralka, sensing their chance, rushed in from either side to take her by the arms. But Elvia spun, using her buried leg as a pivot, thrusting her arms out to deflect the attack and then using the momentum to free her trapped leg.

"Y'all are such lucky girls! Shinichi-sama fawnin' over ya all the time!" Just like Myusel and Petralka's fists, Elvia's right leg was almost audible as it spun through the air. Her kick looked like it could crack a tree in half, but Myusel ducked low, while Petralka crossed her arms to absorb the blow. It still wasn't enough to totally disperse the power of the kick, and Petralka went scooting backwards a couple of meters, bracing herself with

her legs. “I want some! I want some, too!”

“You speak as if your chest were not a permanent fixture before Shinichi’s eyes!”

“You know he won’t shut up about how great your stupid fluffy tail is!”

.....

The dialogue here was completely out of whack. Like, if this were a manga, I would wonder if they printed the wrong script in it.

Even for ladies going crazy, you’re going pretty crazy, ladies.

I could only watch the incredible scene in stupefaction. Then again, there was that part of my brain burning so hot with moe that I thought it might melt. I mean, I was basically watching a battle straight out of a tokusatsu show unfold before my eyes. I had never dreamed such a thing would happen. Plus, those forbidden armors were 100% mecha-girl powered suit things, and they were pretty, you know, cool—or, hot, I guess, and even in the midst of all the nuttiness, as a guy, it was hard not to get excited. Each time Elvia or Myusel moved, their chests moved with them—just follow the bouncing boobs, y’know? And Petralka, I guess she didn’t bounce, exactly, but that was great, too! Her body, lithe and graceful as a fawn, had a delight all its own.

“You are a mere half-elf and werewolf!”

“Yeah? Well, you’re *supposed* to be the almighty Empress!”

Petralka launched a back fist, but Myusel and Elvia each took a single step back and dodged it. Every attack of the forbidden armors took place with impossible speed and power, but if they missed by even a millimeter, then it was all for nothing. I guess it had that much in common with a normal fistfight.

Or that’s what I thought, anyway.

“Why, you...”

The transparent “screen” surrounding Petralka’s torso lit up, a series of lights flickering across it. Then a bunch of small rays of light gathered in front of her, spinning faster and faster until they became a blinding sphere. This looked awfully familiar from all the anime I’d seen—but it couldn’t be. As I watched in astonishment, two rays of light shot from the area of Petralka’s chest.

“The heck...?!”

They carved a dark rut in the earth, just in front of my feet, obviously formed instantaneously by superheated light. Were those beams—as in,

beams? Did we have a beam weapon, here?!

"They've got Killer Boobeams! ...Argh, that's dumb even for me!"

I didn't know how it worked, but apparently that transparent screen doubled as a lens for focusing light into this destructive form. In practice, it looked as if the beams were coming directly from Petralka's chest (such as it was).

"You lowlifes!"

"Speak for yourself, Your Majesty!"

"At least I have—!"

As if in response to Petralka's beam attack, Myusel and Elvia launched those cannonball-like things at her. They were more than fast enough to be plenty destructive, but Petralka easily swept them aside. Maybe the wires were made of some kind of memory material, though, because the one launched by Elvia slowly arced around in midair, wrapping around Petralka's armor. Elvia pulled on the wire while bending over, as if doing a judo throw. Petralka floated into the air, came around, and then slammed into the ground like the head of a gigantic hammer. There was another roar and lots more dust, so much that for a second, I couldn't see her—but then two more blasts of her beams cleared the haze away, and she emerged, unscathed.

"This is, like..." *Bad*, right? The worst. It was bad enough when they started punching each other, but when the ranged weapons come out, you just can't be like, "Oh, they're having a little argument!" anymore. "Minori-san...!" I looked over at the WAC, but she shook her head as if to say there was no longer anything she could do.

Garius and a couple of the royal knights with the least serious wounds rounded the house at that moment, but even they could only watch the three women in amazement.

"I can't believe this," I said. "This is just the worst thing..."

The moment they had attacked Petralka, Myusel and Elvia had probably already consigned themselves to the death penalty. They were lucky, if you could call it that, that Petralka had her own suit of forbidden armor, because without it, she could certainly have been badly hurt or even killed.

Just as importantly, though, I didn't want to see these three fight each other. They might be spitting out their innermost thoughts as they circled and jabbed, but even as they did so, I could see Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia

on the far sides of those transparent screens, and all of them looked deeply disturbed. Whether they really meant what they were saying or not, being forced to speak and to fight by the armor could not have been fun for them.

And on top of all that, the real cause of this trouble was... me.

"And that means..."

Even though we were right there, the forbidden armors made no move to attack us. Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia were completely absorbed by their three-way struggle. Although the armor could be said to be on a rampage, it really started with the dissatisfaction each of them felt.

"You need to give *us* a chance, Your Majesty!"

"We forbid you from taking Shinichi!"

"*Who* needs to give everyone a chance, Myusel?!"

All three of them assumed the same stance, legs apart, fists clenched, sides braced, elbows up—obviously ready to launch an all-out attack at any moment. When I saw them like that, I threw myself toward them, shouting: "Stop! Stoooop!"

"Shinichi-kun?!" Minori-san reached out a hand in shock, but she missed me by an inch, and I went racing towards the girls. They were fighting over me, so if I got in the middle of them, at least they wouldn't use their beam weapons or their cannonballs or whatever—at least, that was my assumption. And a punch, they could pull up short.

"Stop! Everybody just st—mgrh?!"

"Shinichi-sama?!"

"Shinichi?!"

"Shinichi-sama?!"

Again, that was my *assumption*. And we all know what happens when you assume.

Somebody's fist—I didn't know whose it was—pummeled me in the face. I guess there hadn't been enough time to stop. Still, she had managed to slow it down considerably, so at least it didn't knock my head clean off—the huge, hard chunk of metal merely slammed into me in a classic bit of blunt-force trauma. A critical hit to my brain, if you will. It knocked me clean out.

I'm not sure how long I was out. The first thing I noticed when I came

to was a sharp, shooting pain in my cheek.

"Eeyowowow..." I instinctively put my hand to the side of my face, and I could feel how swollen it was. There was a damp rag there, so someone had attempted to see to my injury. My mouth felt off, too. I probed the area with my tongue, and discovered there was something weird with my teeth. Specifically, two of them appeared to be missing. Knocked free by the punch, I guess. That would explain the swelling.

"Urgh," I gurgled, sitting up.

I was surprised to hear someone say, "Master." I looked over and spotted Myusel. "You're back... That's good."

"Yeah, 's great."

"Mm. It seems our long night's vigil caring for you has paid off."

"Y'all didn't do anything, Your Majesty."

"You yourself did not do anything, either."

"Ya sure stopped me when I tried to climb into bed with him."

"Of course we did!"

...There were Petralka and Elvia alongside Myusel. It looked like they had stopped fighting. So at least maybe I hadn't gotten punched in vain. When I thought of how easily I could have ended up with a lot worse than a swollen cheek, I realized how well things had turned out. Or, if you prefer, how lucky I had been.

"Um... Is your cheek all right?" Myusel asked me.

"It'll be fine. Don't worry about it," I said bravely, working my face into a smile. It wasn't very comfortable with my cheek all puffed up, but still, I would live.

Yes, I had survived, but...

"Uh, Myusel?"

"Yes, sir...?"

"You, uh, still can't take that off, huh? And Petralka and Elvia, you too?"

Yes, the three of them were still wearing the forbidden armor. They still looked like walking tanks. The girls inside were still wearing the skintight, leotard-like outfits, and still looking like something straight out of a sci-fi movie. I was seriously curious about what the heck was going on here.

"Oh! Shinichi-kun, you're awake." Minori-san appeared in the open doorway. She was dressed, uncharacteristically, in an apron. "We had the garrison doctor look at you and he thinks you'll be fine, but we were a little

worried when you didn't wake up. Myusel and the others swore they wouldn't leave your side until you came to." Minori-san smiled as she told me this. "Anyway, breakfast is ready. I'm no Myusel, but I gave it a shot. Think you can eat?"

"If it's something very soft, then yeah, probably," I said, trying not to open my mouth too wide. I made to get out of the bed. I guess I still had some damage, so to speak, because I wobbled and just about fell over.

"Shinichi-sama?!"

"Shinichi!"

Myusel cried out, but it was Petralka's hand that reached out and held me up. To be perfectly accurate, she tried to reach out, and the forbidden armor moved its arm the same way. The heavy-weaponry look was for more than just show; that arm felt rock solid.

And then it started...

"Heh heh! Shinichi, let us repay you for yesterday—*we* shall carry *you* this time."

"Er, Your Ma—yipes!" I said.

"Your Majesty, no fair!"

"Majesty..."

If I was surprised, Myusel and Elvia were downright peeved. But Petralka, looking pleased with herself, informed them, "The early bird gets the worm," and then swept me off my feet and walked away, the suit so stable that it felt like I was being carried by a boulder.

"G-Geez, Petralka, this is embarrassing."

"Pay it no mind. Allow us to hold you in our arms," she grinned.

"'Hold me in your arms...'?" That sounded borderline really dirty, and what with Petralka's childlike body, it sort of felt like I was doing something really questionable, or having it done to me, or something. And her face was so, so close... er, uh...

"It is perhaps not ideal being unable to remove this armor, but it does have its uses—such as enabling us to sweep you off your feet, Shinichi!"

"Argh, you don't have to sweep me off anything!"

"You are so light, Shinichi! Come now, don't struggle!"

It was clear that carrying me really was a piece of cake for Petralka, who continued to grin as she carted me down the hallway, Myusel and Elvia following grudgingly behind.

So the girls were still stuck in the armor, but it didn't seem like they

were going to start whaling on each other again. Small victories.

And so it went. I confirmed with the girls that there was still no sign of the forbidden armor coming off. They hadn't even put it on voluntarily; it had all been automatic, and there was no obvious way for anyone to help them out of it. No handles, no tabs labeled "lift here to release." So despite being stuck in the armor, the girls just had to go on with their lives...

"It's *armor*," I said to myself. "Somebody made it, presumably on the assumption that whoever put it on would want to take it off eventually. Whatever happened to the last person to wear it, anyway?"

If you could never take the armor off, then it should have been sealed up along with the last "pilot," and we should have found a skeleton or a mummy inside, like in some really difficult RPG.

Incidentally, the transparent "screen" surrounding the torso and head seemed pretty versatile: a hole would open up when the girls were eating breakfast, or when they needed a drink or something. I legit didn't understand how this worked. Surely there was no way we could go on like this, and yet...

I was walking down the hallway after breakfast, thinking it over, when:

"Myusel? Petralka?" I saw them squatting in the hallway, facing each other, seemingly talking about something. They looked unusually serious. Was there going to be another fight? I rushed over to them. "What's wrong?!"

They looked up at me, startled. "Sh-Shinichi? Get lost!" Petralka shouted.

"Hrk?" I came to a screeching halt.

She must have been awfully angry, because her face was bright red, and the look on her face and the tone of her voice were unusually sharp. My instincts told me to just do as she said, but from a distance of about two meters, I managed to squeak out, "N-No fighting... Let's just all stay calm..."

"*No one is fighting here!*"

"Erk! Then why are you so mad?" I looked at Myusel with an expression I hoped communicated: *What's going on?*

When I caught Myusel's eye, she shifted uncomfortably and looked at

the ground before responding, “It’s... It’s nothing...”

“Really?”

“Y-Yes...” Her thighs sort of rubbed together in a way that was strangely erotic... or would have been, if not for the surreal *click-clack-click* from the forbidden armor. “It’s nothing unusual... except I wanna go to the friggin’ toilet so bad!”

I kind of jumped.

“Oh!” Myusel slapped her hands over her mouth, but it was too late. Oh yeah... the forbidden armor had a nasty tendency to make you spit out your most secret thoughts. Myusel, turning more and more red, tried to walk it back. “Sh-Shinichi-sama, I... I’m at my limit. I can’t hold it anymore!”

“Oh, uh... Oh.”

Red-faced and eyes brimming, nonetheless Myusel’s mouth continued running itself. She looked kind of perverse, like this was some bizarre S&M game, and... argh, what was this sudden impulse I was feeling, this desire to pick on her? *No! Get it together!*

Okay. Being serious now.

Anyway, it was natural enough. She’d been trapped in the armor since yesterday, meaning there’d been no chance to, you know, answer nature’s call. But she *had* been able to eat and drink like normal, meaning biological processes would eventually have their effect. She still couldn’t get the forbidden armor off, though. And so she and Petralka had been crouched in a discreet corner, trying to decide what to do—until I bumbled along.

But now what? Having been clued in to what was going on, I could hardly just say, “Welp, okie dokie then!” and walk away. But I didn’t exactly have a lot of advice to offer...

The limit was fast approaching. Both of them looked at the ground, trembling. This was starting to become an issue of, like, human dignity, I thought. Whereupon:

“What’s goin’ on?”

I turned and found Elvia standing behind me. She looked a little perplexed, but otherwise perfectly normal. At the very least, she didn’t look like someone straining to hold in number one. In fact, she looked downright relieved.

“Elvia?”

“Uh-huh?”

I went over to her, then gently ushered her behind an especially

prominent pillar. “Say, uh, Elvia, you’ve been wearing that thing since yesterday, right?” I whispered.

“Yeah, so?”

“And you ate a normal breakfast this morning.”

“Minori-sama’s cooking’ll never beat Myusel’s, but it’s not half bad.” She sounded even more energized than normal.

“And, uh... how are you doing with your, uhh, toilet needs?”

In some cases, putting a question like that to someone of the opposite gender would be considered outright sexual harassment, and I wasn’t eager to ask—but just then was no time to hesitate. I swallowed my embarrassment and asked the question.

Elvia’s reply was immediate: “Aw, the armor just absorbs it for ya.” She pointed downwards. Just between the legs was a little piece of armor, almost like it was designed to support the area...

“Say what?!”

“Yeah, this morning I just couldn’t wait any longer. I didn’t really mean to, but I—”

“Okay, stop! I get it! I don’t need the details!” I said.

Come to think of it, a lot of work suits that weren’t easy to get off once you put them on—things like spacesuits or jet pilots’ suits—came equipped with that sort of functionality. But who would have guessed the forbidden armor was one of them?

This thing was getting weirder and weirder.

I couldn’t exactly imagine myself going up to Myusel and exclaiming, “Hey, turns out they just suck it up for you, so go ahead and let ’er rip!” And if I *did* manage it, I could hardly imagine Myusel responding, “Oh, okay!” and taking my advice.

“Uh, Elvia?”

“Yeah? What’s up?”

“Could you, uh... Could you tell Myusel and Petralka about that?”

“About what?”

“I mean, about not having to hold it...”

“Oh! On it!” She went trundling off in the direction of the others. I spent just a second watching her go—and then I beat feet.

So that solved the toilet problem, I guess. But there was no way Myusel and Petralka and Elvia could go on living like this. While I was unconscious from taking a giant metal fist to the head, a messenger had arrived from Prime Minister Zahar at the castle with word of some kind of description of the forbidden armor that had been discovered elsewhere in the archives. It told us a lot about the armor, but unfortunately, how to take it off wasn't one of the things it explained.

"So, to summarize..." I was in the living room with Minori-san, Hikaru-san, Myusel, and Elvia, along with Garius and Petralka, who would be staying with us. Lauron went back to the castle with Zahar-san's messenger and the injured royal knights. I didn't love that this meant Petralka had no bodyguards—but then again, she wasn't exactly vulnerable in her current state, and she still had Garius with her, anyway.

"To summarize, the forbidden armor automatically attaches itself to any woman who touches it, causes them to say everything that's on their mind, and in a broad sense, can influence their actions." Minori-san tapped a finger on her cheek as she spoke.

"We don't know who built it," Garius said, crossing his arms with a frown, "and I *certainly* can't imagine why. It's far too indirect to prove a useful trap against one's enemies. And if that's what it were for, why even bother including the ability to deal with one's... business?"

He had a point.

"I'm speculating here," Minori-san said, "but I don't think this armor is really 'cursed' or a trap at all. I think it might even have been intended to *help* soldiers in war."

"Help them?"

"If you'll pardon my asking, Minister Cordobal, do you have experience of real combat? Not just a sword duel, but—"

"But a killing contest on an actual battlefield?"

"Yes, sir."

"Several times. I haven't exactly kept count, but I would estimate five or six different engagements, including close-quarters combat with soldiers from Bahairam," Garius said.

Wow. Garius had ceded the succession to Petralka, but until she got married or had a kid or something, he was next in line for the throne—I wouldn't have expected them to risk him in front-line combat against enemy troops. I guess his *I'm a hottie!* exterior didn't mean he couldn't be a

warrior at heart.

"I see. Then this should sound familiar: you're in the middle of a battle, and you know what you're supposed to do, but you're so agitated that you can't seem to do it."

"Yes, I recognize that..." Garius nodded. "That is the point of intensive training—so that when the moment comes, a soldier need not think at all, but can trust his body to act on its own. But there are limits even to that."

"Uh-huh. But what if you could force your body to surpass those limits somehow?"

Then Garius connected the dots, and his eyes went wide as he surveyed Petralka's armor. "You think that's what it's for...?"

"Yes, sir. And I think you understand, too, that there's a lot more to a battlefield than swinging your sword around. Unit cohesion is paramount in group combat, but sometimes excitement or panic can keep you from saying what needs to be said. All the more so for inexperienced soldiers."

"I see what you're saying..."

"Right. What if you could get around those sorts of problems by just automatically saying whatever was on your mind?"

"Indeed. Experienced veterans might not need such help, but the untested..."

What if you could unlock the utmost potential of even the most inexperienced soldier?

"I think that might be why they lack helmets, too."

"Do you, now?"

"Again, sir, you probably know this, but helmets obviously limit field of vision. If you're not used to them, they make it impossible even to run forward, let alone wield a weapon."

You know, I thought I'd read in some manga somewhere that a full-face helmet made fighting extremely difficult. Humans derive a surprising amount of their sense of balance from their vision. You could find out exactly how much if you closed your eyes and tried to stand on one foot. With your eyes open, you could probably do it all day—or at least until your legs got tired—but with your eyes closed, it's much harder.

So a restricted field of vision made it harder to move. If you could have a wide field of vision but still be safely defended, that would be ideal. If those screens were at least as strong as bulletproof glass, they would certainly serve for armor. And they wouldn't shatter like glass. But then

there was extra armor around the arms and the lower legs—the parts of the body that held weapons and moved along the ground, the areas most likely to get hurt. Hold on... Could it be that the whole "mecha-girl" look was unexpectedly logical?

"My guess is that this armor was created for new soldiers or conscripts—for amateurs. Japan no longer has a draft, but there *are* countries that claim every citizen should be a soldier and encourage everyone to keep weapons in their homes and participate in military training. Some of those countries have even had special weaponry made that's adapted for use by nonprofessional soldiers."

Ah, now it all made sense. My dad, a light-novel author, had explained sort of the same thing to me: in Switzerland, he claimed, there was practically a rifle in every house. The country looks peaceful and has vowed to remain neutral in conflicts, but most of the adult men there are actually in the military reserves, and if it ever came to a fight, they could all be part of it. Supposedly there won't be any more wars that involve the mobilization of entire populations, so maybe it's merely a point of historical interest now. But still.

Think of the FN P90 that you see in so many movies and anime—it has a sort of sci-fi look. The construction makes extensive use of polymers, and it looks a bit like some kind of tropical fish. You might think it was designed for the special forces, but apparently it was originally created for military reserves to keep at home to use in case of an emergency. It was developed as a so-called Personal Defense Weapon, or PDW, so features like small size, rust resistance, and intuitive usability were primary concerns—all because reserve troops were going to be keeping them in their houses.

Hmmm... The more I thought about it, though, the more these things looked like sci-fi weapons. Who could possibly have made them? No country I was aware of in this world—not Eldant, not Bahairam, not Zwelberich—had the technology to do something like this, or even to conceive of the idea. In fact, Garius and the others were *so* unfamiliar with the concept that the armor hardly seemed to bother them at all, but for me, it was like a mob**e suit had suddenly walked into the middle of *The Lo**** *the Rings*.

"What became of the other armors, if I may ask?" Garius said, looking around.

“We put them in my room,” I answered. “In the office.”

Five separate suits of “forbidden armor” had been discovered and brought to the mansion. Figuring it wasn’t a good plan to leave the remaining two lying around, I enlisted Brooke’s help to move them into my office.

“I figured Brooke and I would be safe if we happened to accidentally touch them.”

I had thought it might be a bad idea to leave the armor in Hikaru-san’s room, because frankly I wasn’t sure how the armor distinguished between men and women. If it was actually about external appearance, then there was a real danger that—

Huh?

If this stuff was really some kind of Personal Defense Weapon, then why did it only work for women? I guess it was possible we had happened to only *find* suits that worked for women, but wouldn’t it have been more convenient to make the armor work for anyone?

Speaking of Hikaru-san, he was studying Myusel and the others, and finally said softly, “I don’t know. These things look a lot less like armor than like some sort of powered suit.”

He was right about that. The design was simple—there was no complicated mask or helmet, none of the decorations or embellishments we associate with medieval weapons and armor. The only aesthetic here was practicality—a very modern touch.

“Plus it can shoot beams and stuff...” Not that you couldn’t do something similar with magic. “Could it be...”

There was a common trope, and not just in fantasy stories: ages in the past, there was some super-advanced civilization, so ancient it isn’t even in the history books. The civilization is destroyed for some reason, but some artifact of it remains—an artifact like this forbidden armor. That would explain the whole sci-fi mech look.

“It seems the only thing we can be sure of is that we can’t be sure of anything,” Garius said, letting out a breath. “Including how to remove the armor. Most distressing.”

“If it’s not cursed and it isn’t intended as a trap, then there has to be a way to take it off,” Minori-san said. “If it’s supposed to be for personal defense, then maybe there’s some kind of safety, something to keep it from accidentally coming off in combat.”

“How do you mean?” Hikaru-san asked.

“If the armor is really intended to protect inexperienced or untrained soldiers, then it wouldn’t be very useful if it came off too easily, would it? Maybe it’s designed so it can’t be removed until the mission is accomplished, or until all threats in the area have been eliminated or something.”

“The mission?” I said. “Like, a combat mission?”

I didn’t think there were any threats around Myusel and the others right now—no enemies to speak of. So did that mean it was about accomplishing some sort of mission? But it was a total accident that the girls had put on the armor. There *was* no mission. “Does that mean... they can never take the armor off?”

Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia let out a cry.

“And we certainly can’t take Her Majesty back to the castle in this condition,” Garius said gravely.

Yeah, it would probably cause a bit of a stir if Petralka went around looking like that. Not to mention that if rumor got out that the empress had been trapped in some sort of “cursed armor,” things could get out of hand in a hurry. Plus, in that case, suspicion would probably fall on Garius before anyone else. I’m sure he didn’t want that. As I’ve mentioned, if Petralka were to be conveniently gotten out of the way somehow, he would be next in line for the throne.

“Our people at the castle have been instructed to search for any possible clue. Luckily, it seems that eating, drinking, and other... daily necessities are not impacted, so while it pains me to say this, Her Majesty will simply have to endure for a while. As will you and your household, Shinichi.”

“I wondered if that might be the case.”

Myusel and Elvia, of course, and the rest of us, had no choice but to roll with this bizarre situation. I would probably have to suspend classes at school for a while.

I looked once again at Myusel and the others in their forbidden armor, and all I could do was sigh.

I gathered up the laundry and took it out into the yard. It was a perfectly ordinary, everyday chore, but with the massive, powerful arms of the

“forbidden armor,” I could easily carry a load that would have been a heaping armful otherwise. In fact, because I wasn’t using my own hands, it didn’t really feel like I was carrying anything, and I was more worried that I might drop some clothes along the way without realizing it.

After an entire day wearing the armor, I had started to feel like I was getting the hang of moving in it. When you grabbed something, there was no sense that you were touching it, which was confusing at first. Seeking more tactile feedback, I would put more strength into my fingers and end up crushing a dinner plate or something. I felt no bodily fatigue. Nor were there actually any... *elimination* problems, although even knowing this, I found myself hesitant—but in general, I was able to lead a basically normal life despite being unable to remove the armor. In fact, it made some things easier.

Not that I would go so far as to suggest I didn’t *want* to be able to take off the armor. For example, I couldn’t take a bath like this, and I was afraid my body odor might get so bad I couldn’t hide it with perfume. Or perhaps, as with my bathroom needs, the armor had some way of attending to my personal hygiene...

I looked up at the blue sky, perfect laundry weather, and began to dry the wash.

How... How can *I get this armor off?*

If I had correctly followed what Minori-sama and the others had been discussing earlier, the forbidden armor couldn’t be removed until all threats in the area had been eliminated, or until some kind of mission or objective had been completed.

“Objective...” I hadn’t put on this armor in order to obtain any objective. But the armor seemed to believe I had one. Perhaps one I didn’t even realize was there. “An objective... A goal?”

“Request confirmation of goal designation.”

“Huh?!”

I dropped the laundry in my giant metal hand. Was it just me, or had I just heard a voice? I didn’t recognize it, and it seemed to come from nowhere, surprising me.

“Wh-Who’s there?” I looked around, but I didn’t see anyone else. Which had to mean...

“Goal designation. Remove all obstacles to actualization of wearer’s wishes.”

“Wha...?” There was that voice again. I looked around once more, but I was still alone. Was I hearing things? Or... “What are these obstacles, please?”

“Two women. Both acknowledged threats.”

When I asked a question, there was an answer, like a whisper in my ear. No—more like a voice in my own head. I was sure I wasn’t hearing things. At least, assuming I hadn’t simply gone crazy. Hadn’t they said that this forbidden armor was technically classified as an item that used some kind of mind control magic? Could the forbidden armor be speaking directly into my own heart...?

“These two women...”

“Designations: ‘Her Majesty,’ ‘Elvia-san.’”

I nearly choked. The armor believed Her Majesty and Elvia-san were “obstacles.” And that these obstacles had to be eliminated...

“I—I don’t believe that about Her Majesty or Elvia-san!” I retorted to the voice—or rather, to the armor. In an effort to calm myself down, I picked up the laundry I had dropped.

The way I heard the voice seemed similar to the way the magic rings worked. At first, the words I heard were in an unintelligible foreign language, but then their meaning floated into my mind, overlapping with the sound. But in order for the magic rings to work, both you and the other person had to be wearing one, and each of you had to expend a modicum of magical energy to use them. That meant whatever this was, it only seemed *similar*, but had to function some other way.

“Wearer acknowledges that these two women, ‘Her Majesty,’ ‘Elvia-san,’ are potential obstacles to goal, strategic operations concerning ‘Kanou Shinichi.’”

“Strategic operations? Concerning Shinichi-sama?”

Could that possibly refer to my personal desire that Shinichi-sama’s affections should favor me, much as I knew it was a foolish wish that reached beyond my station?

“I—”

Without meaning to, I bit my lip. It was true, my heart ached every time I saw Her Majesty or Elvia-san with Shinichi-sama. Seeing how close he was with them, I felt... jealous. I wanted to be closer to him, too. Closer than anyone. I wanted to feel the heat of his body, catch the scent of him, always...

“Er...?” I suddenly discovered something about the laundry I’d picked up: I’d torn it clean in two with the armor’s hands.

This particular outfit belonged to Elvia-san.

“Did I...?” I stood there, astonished at what I myself had done. Yes, I was jealous of her. Maybe I even felt things were unfair. But perhaps more: maybe, without even realizing it myself, I had come to hate Her Majesty and Elvia-san from the bottom of my heart.

I loved them both so much.

At least, I should have.

Her Majesty, for one, was so kind as to be friends with me, a commoner and half-elf. It was essentially thanks to Her Majesty that I had even been able to meet Shinichi-sama. She was so pretty and so delightful, truly a wonderful person. As for Elvia-san, she always smiled and complimented my cooking. I was only average when it came to housework—I knew how to cook a little, do the laundry, keep things clean—but she was continually amazed. She was cheerful and outgoing, and being with her was always fun.

And yet... I didn’t want to let the two of them monopolize Shinichi-sama’s feelings. I didn’t want him to see only them, to stop looking at me. The thought that he might not talk to me as often, might start to smile at me less—that, that was the one thought I couldn’t bear. A fact I couldn’t deny.

“Goal designation. Remove all obstacles to actualization of wearer’s wishes,” the forbidden armor repeated.

I didn’t say anything back to it, but stood where I was, frozen.

Everything is a matter of perspective—or so I chose to tell myself.

When it came to the forbidden armor, at first I had been all: *How dangerous and deadly! How can we get it off?! Oh, poor Myusel and Petralka and Elvia! What a tragedy!* You know, terrified and confused and moe—I mean, uh, mournful.

But the suits wouldn’t come off for now, and that was that. It wouldn’t help anyone to get fixated on the worst possible outcomes; I knew from experience how that kind of thinking tended to take you to strange places. So I decided to find a different way of looking at things. Most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be, and all that.

To put it more succinctly, I decided to enjoy the situation. I mean, we

were talking about *mecha shoujo*, girls in powered suits, the sort of thing I'd only ever seen in anime and manga and light novels, walking around before my eyes. It was incredible! And it wasn't even cosplay or something! *And* the girls wearing those suits included a gorgeous half-elf, a gorgeous young empress, and a gorgeous beast-eared girl! Real ones! It was an embarrassment of riches! An otaku's dream come true! I would moe until I could moe no more, until I was consumed by my own burning moe passion and reduced to moe-ified ashes!

And sooooo...

"All right, smile! Everyone say 'Cheese!'"

And so I was smack in the middle of a little photo shoot in the living room with Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia, using my smartphone for a camera.

"That's it, perfect! The camera loves you, girls!" I was getting so into it that I wouldn't have been that surprised to hear myself blurt out, "Okay, why don't you start by just taking off those tops?"

Petralka and Elvia, seeming to feel, like me, that they might as well enjoy it, were happily striking poses and goofing around. I guess they were used to it from that cosplay photo shoot we'd done once. Myusel, though... she didn't seem in the mood. In fact, she looked sort of down.

"Myusel? Something the matter?" I ventured.

"Huh?" She looked at me as if snapping back to reality. Then she looked right, then left, as if she wasn't even sure she had been spoken to—then she finally found me, and shook her head. "N-No." Then she tried to smile.

I say *tried* because it clearly wasn't natural. It looked awkward, obviously forced. I saw her smile every single day, so I knew. I was sure there was something wrong now.

Well, why was I so surprised? She was stuck in a powered suit, or armor or whatever, with no idea when she would be able to take it off. If we couldn't figure it out, she might be stuck in that thing forever. Who *wouldn't* feel a little anxious, knowing that? At least we knew from the records that whoever had worn the armor last had gotten out successfully, so maybe there was a ray of hope to cling to.

"Aren't you quite the little mercenary?" Hikaru-san said to me. He was watching the photo shoot from the sofa, leaning against an armrest, his head propped against his hand. He gave a dramatic sigh. "Your whole mood can turn on a dime."

“Well, what am I supposed to do? We don’t know how to get those things off right now, anyway. We have the chance to take some pictures! Show this really happened! So why wouldn’t we?” I clenched my fist for emphasis: yes! We had a real chance!

I understood Myusel’s anxiety! I did! But!

“We may never get an opportunity like this again!”

Hikaru-san didn’t say anything. He didn’t even bother to open his eyes all the way as he glared at me.

What? I would have expected Hikaru-san to be the first to get on board with this, so why was he looking at me so skeptically?

“Look how cute they are!” I protested. “I know what a surprise it was at first, but all three of them are just adorable!”

And cuteness was justice!

“You... You think so, indeed?” Petralka, overhearing my impassioned argument, asked shyly.

Not only that, but the way you asked that question makes you even cuter. It’s double cuteness. A double dose of adorability! Ahhhh, I can’t stand it!

Elvia too, and even the slightly dispirited Myusel, looked a bit embarrassed, but happy. If you had asked me to rank them in order of sweetness and lovability, I could never have answered you.

“If the armor won’t come off, then the only thing for us to do is have some fun with it!”

“Indeed. Shinichi is quite correct,” Petralka nodded with a smile. And then she said: “So tell us, which among us is the cutest of all?”

“.....Er.” She was still smiling. I had been in such an excited state, but now I froze. “Well, uh...”

I didn’t know what to say. I suddenly found myself in a very dangerous position, walking a tightrope with no safety net. I was reminded that the very presence of the armors was in part the result of a problem I had tried to sweep aside, but one which had neither been resolved nor gone away. One big issue that was literally right in front of me.

“U-Um, you’re... all... cute?”

Well, it was worth a shot.

I wasn’t just trying to get out of the question. It was the real truth, how I felt deep down inside. But would the three girls accept that? No, of course not.

“Yes, but we are the cutest, are we not? The one for which you ‘moeru’ the most?”

“Er... uh.”

“Naw, it’s me! Ain’t it, Shinichi-sama?!”

“Well... umm...”

“Shinichi-sama, I... I...”

“Uhh, y’see...”

As I hemmed and hawed, the atmosphere among Petralka, Elvia, and Myusel got more and more tense. Maybe hostility heats up a room, because I was sure starting to sweat. I could see where this was going...

“I can’t believe you.” Hikaru-san managed to sigh again even as he was standing up from the couch and making for the exit. He was wearing a helmet. Where had he gotten that?

A warm afternoon breeze blew through the front yard. It had no color, hardly any sound—you only knew it was there because of the way the grass and flowers bobbed as it went by. It’s almost like watching something’s shadow—we can’t perceive it directly, but only the traces of it after it’s gone by.

And yet...

“If this ends in tears, do not come crying to us.”

There was a rushing sound, as if the wind itself were afraid. Petralka’s long, silver hair splayed out, glittering in the lengthening light.

It was so beautiful. *She* was so beautiful, but it was the beauty of a Valkyrie on the cusp of battle. Her resolve was set; all excess had been wiped away, and only what was essential remained. Like an unsheathed blade, the beauty came from its functionality. Beautiful—and terrible.

“I understand.” Nodding at Petralka, directly across from her, was Myusel. She sounded calm, but on her face there was no hint of her usual retiring nature. Maybe she was just as resolved to fight as Petralka was—or maybe it was the forbidden armor causing her to speak.

“Y’ took the words right out of my mouth.” Forming the third corner of the triangle was Elvia. She was normally so footloose and fancy free, but now she looked like a woman prepared for battle. No—in her case, perhaps it was more appropriate to say she looked like a beast setting out on the

hunt. Ready to attack, to maul, to claim victory. To judge by her smile, she didn't even believe this would be a fight.

The three girls stared each other down. The enmity among them was palpable, so strong it permitted no one to come between them. I could only watch helplessly...

"Very well, then," Petralka said, and the three of them took up fighting stances. "Let us fight!"

The spark of battle was struck. All three of them lashed out with their "arms" at exactly the same instant. They held forth their hands as if to envelope something, as if to force some kind of energy into the space between them. And a second later, a glowing globe of energy appeared between them, spinning wildly...

"*Broom*!"

...Gotcha. No, it didn't.

The forbidden armors' huge, plier-like hands uncurled their fingers—or perhaps they were more like claws. Whatever they were, they had probably been intended to allow for fine manual work.

A thin rope ran between those "claws." Myusel moved quickly, tugging at the rope wrapped around the fingers of one hand as if pulling the safety pin on a grenade, until something very much like a broom appeared between her fingers...!

It was the work of an instant for her. The claws moved so fast they left an afterimage; I could only goggle. But as for the other two girls...

"A nice try, Myusel, but we have Broom as well!" Petralka had also completed a "Broom." She, too, moved at an incredible speed. I could hardly see what had happened.

And then there was Elvia, proclaiming proudly: "I've got Ladder!"

Although more complicated than "Broom," the product appeared in an instant. To create something of greater complexity in the same span of time was to say that you were the fastest. Even if a normal human couldn't perceive the difference between one one-hundredth of a second and two one-hundreths.

"What?!" Petralka exclaimed.

"A-All right, then—Tokyo Tower!" The other two clapped their hands together, demolishing their "brooms," and in the blink of an eye they had reformed the ropes between their fingers into something like Elvia's "Ladder," except it came to a point at one end.

It was Tokyo Tower! It really was!

Even if the distinction of tallest building in Japan had been usurped by Sky Tree, Tokyo Tower had been a symbol of a nation grasping toward prosperity for half a century after the end of the war, and there it was before my eyes...!

"Wh-When did you learn to...?"

"Minori-sama taught me once."

"*What*?!"

In a word, the three girls were playing cat's cradle. A fiery, fierce battle of cat's cradle.

I can hear you now: *Pff!* Cat's cradle*?* you're quipping. But the girls were using the fingers of the forbidden armor to do cat's cradle faster than you've ever seen. If there were cat's cradle tournaments in Eldant, these three would have swept the podium.

The air was tense. Their faces were serious. This was a real battle, no question.

"Nice job, Shinichi-kun, thinking of this on the spot," Minori-san said from beside me, where she was also watching the contest unfold. She sounded half exasperated and half genuinely impressed. I was pretty pleased myself, if I may say so. I had suddenly remembered how my little sister Shizuki and I used to have cat's cradle contests back when we were in grade school.

"I was afraid that if they seriously started fighting again, there'd be casualties this time," I said.

They had been bent on knowing which one of them was the cutest. And as I had been at a loss to provide an answer, they had been on the verge of starting another fight to settle the question—whereupon I had come up with this idea in a panic. I thought it was a little crazy myself, but anything was better than for the giant metal fists to start flying.

"I—I love girls with terrific fine motor skills!!" I had exclaimed.

My thinking was this: equipped with the forbidden armor, Myusel and the others had many, many times their normal strength. They could move so fast that they could leave an afterimage almost at will—I had seen it myself (or not seen it, as the case may be). As long as they insisted on a physical contest, they would be locked in an eternal stalemate. And then would come the punching.

That was when the idea had struck me. Everyone knows what it's like

to try to use a pen or a box knife while wearing mittens—suddenly, it's not so easy. You have to get used to it. How much more so when you aren't even using your own hand, but a gigantic metal arm. And so I suggested a contest that would pit them against an exceptionally difficult task. If it produced an obvious hierarchy, so much the better, but even if it didn't, it would buy us some time.

"Okay," Hikaru-san said, looking at me questioningly. "But how is that a contest?"

".....Uhh..."

I didn't have an answer to that. The whole idea of a cat's cradle contest was one that had just popped out of my mouth, a desperate bid to avoid an oncoming tragedy. It wasn't like I had thought through the details.

"Irresponsible..." Hikaru-san said, his voice heavy with criticism.

"Come on, we can't just let them start hitting each other!"

"That's not what I meant. 'I love girls with terrific fine motor skills'? You're just pouring oil on the fire. One wrong move and we're all done for."

"Erk..."

Well, uh, he wasn't wrong. Nope.

Myusel and the others could easily make a gigantic mess of this place if they got it into their heads. And given that the forbidden armors took a pretty broad interpretation of everything that went through their heads, the smallest thing could turn into the biggest problem if we weren't careful. I didn't know if those suits were really meant to help out inexperienced soldiers or what, but I was starting to think I had spotted some flaws in the design.

Normally, Myusel would never in a million years have considered getting into a fight with Petralka. Elvia probably wouldn't have, either. Now I had to use the time I had bought to come up with some kind of solution.

"I wonder if Garius-san has figured anything out yet..." I was hoping as hard as I could that somebody would come to my rescue.

"It's practically been less than twenty-four hours. I really wouldn't expect them to have learned anything new. Anyway, I'm sure they would tell us immediately if they had," Hikaru-san said.

"Blargh," I offered. He was right as right could be.

As we stood talking, the cat's cradle battle got more intense.

"This ain't getting' us anywhere!" Elvia finally cried, tossing her rope

to the ground.

Uh-oh. There's the break.

Well, if the forbidden armors all had the same capacities, then either Petralka or Elvia was going to be at a disadvantage in a test of finger agility. The armor itself could make up for simple disparities in reaction time or physical strength. It was so powerful that individual differences were subsumed. The difference between thirty and forty kilograms of grip force, for example, was significant—but when you started dealing with 500 kilos and more, subtle differences started to matter a lot less.

Close work like this, though, was more like an extension of normal, daily tasks, and a bit of extra strength from the suit didn't matter as much. Elvia was an artist, so she was pretty good at delicate hand movements, but it wasn't the same sort of thing as the nimbleness required for cat's cradle. The closest thing to that was the housework Myusel did, mending clothes and that sort of thing.

In any event, this was not good. It looked like this competition was going to wrap up sooner than I had anticipated.

"We can't let this go on..."

"It's all right!" I said, holding back Minori-san, who looked ready to jump into the middle of the deadly trio. "This is quicker than I had hoped... but I thought this might happen, so I've already got another contest in mind."

"You do?" Minori-san said, and I nodded at her, trying to look confident. Then I turned to my other companion. "Hikaru-san?"

"Yeah, sure." He sighed, and produced the thing I had made sure to have on hand, pulling it over on a cart like the one Myusel normally used for serving tea or dinner. It would have been most appropriate for me to present Myusel and the others with it myself, but out of an excess of concern that my presence might make things worse than they had to be, Hikaru-san had volunteered to do the job.

He pushed the cart directly among the three girls. There were six plates on it, two for each girl, along with two long pieces of wood each—three sets of chopsticks. And on the dishes were...

"Agility test, round two!" Hikaru-san declared. Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia all turned toward him in surprise. He went on: "Behold! That most venerable implement of Japanese culinary culture, the chopstick! The first person to move these hundred beans from the dish on the right to the one on

the left wins the title of sweetest *Yamato nadeshiko* of them all!"

"Y—"

"Yamato...?"

"Nadeshiko?"

"Is that like *Space Battleship Yamato*?"

No, no it's not.

Yamato nadeshiko was an expression that described the ideal Japanese maiden, demure and refined, but they didn't know that. No, *they* thought of a classic anime. I know I was completely, totally, not remotely one to talk, but I was starting to think maybe there were some pitfalls to making anime and manga their very first exposure to Japanese culture.

Hikaru-san seemed to have won them over by sheer force of will, though, because Myusel and the others grabbed the chopsticks with the claws of their forbidden armor.

"Very well! Let it be a contest, then, for speed with these chopsticks!" Petralka pronounced.

"Couldn't have said it better myself," Myusel responded. And then they lunged at the cart, and the battle began... sort of.

"Ahh...!"

"Hrgh... This makes no sense...!"

"Grr!"

Coming from a place that didn't use chopsticks, they were never going to have a very easy time of this contest. They saw characters in anime and manga using chopsticks all the time, so they had a general idea of how they were supposed to work, but doing it themselves? That was something else. It would have been hard enough with their actual hands, but doing it using the claws of a powered exoskeleton was darn near impossible. They clutched at the beans with the utensils, only to have them *pop-pop-pop* out of their grip. In frustration, they tried to stab the beans, but they were too small and round, and the chopsticks simply slipped off them.

It was a bizarre sight, three girls in heavy armor crouched over bowls of beans, struggling to learn how to use chopsticks.

"I've got to hand it to you," Hikaru-san said, not entirely admiringly, as he came back to us. "You sure came up with a real time waster."

"It was the only thing I could think of that we could get together in a hurry but that wouldn't cause any fights."

"At least it should buy us a few minutes."

Myusel, in particular, was struggling mightily to move the beans from one bowl to another. She was holding the chopsticks more or less correctly, but first she put too much strength into it and couldn't pick up the beans; then she managed to pick one up, but dropped it halfway there, and when she finally had it again, it would slip away from her. This went on and on. Even for experienced chopstick users, it was a task that would have taken a good five minutes, so I had assumed it would burn plenty of time. Although if it took *too* long, someone was likely to snap again.

I was watching the contest develop when Minori-san said nonchalantly, "Shinichi-kun, why don't you just pick one of them while we still have the chance?"

"Huh...?!" I felt myself go stiff.

Minori-san leaned toward me. Behind her glasses, I could see in her eyes that this wasn't a joke; she looked completely serious. Uhh... was she *angry*?

"The whole reason we have this problem is because you wouldn't make a choice," she said.

"Well, I..."

"You've got them distracted right now, but the real contest here is about who *you* think is 'cutest,' isn't it, Shinichi-kun?"

"W-Well, I..."

"She's right, Shinichi-san," Hikaru-san broke in. "Those girls' real 'objective' is you."

I just didn't say anything.

"If you choose one, Myusel and the others have no more reason to fight, and the armor comes off, right?"

That certainly, uh, seemed like a very plausible possibility. It would be worth trying... probably. I thought.

"B—But..." I looked away, trying to escape Minori-san's and Hikaru-san's gazes.

Yes, it would be worth trying, but you couldn't exactly "try" it, could you?!

Even when I attempted to look away from Minori-san and Hikaru-san, I found myself staring right at the three girls, assiduously working away at their beans.

Myusel.

Petralka.

Elvia.

Which of them did I find attractive? All of them.

There was Myusel: gorgeous and even-keeled but somewhat retiring; short and sweet and serious and kind, yet stubborn in her own way; who made me feel more relaxed just being with her.

There was Petralka: gorgeous and strong-willed, yet somewhat hesitant despite being the absolute ruler of an entire nation; who made me want to embrace her with all my strength and keep her safe.

There was Elvia: gorgeous and also innocent like a puppy; a little oblivious, but also openhearted in a way that, to my own surprise, sometimes really got my heart racing.

All of them were really, truly cute. If you asked me to rank them in terms of who I liked best, I genuinely couldn't. If just one of them had confessed her feelings to me, I would have floated off to heaven at that very moment. Would have exclaimed "I love you, too!" and thrown myself at her without a second thought. I mean hugs, kisses, the whole R-18+ gal-game enchilada. No question.

Actually, wait. First I probably would have exclaimed, "Why would such a beautiful girl be interested in me? Is this a trap? It has to be a trap! Did you think I would be reeled in by such obvious bait? Think again!" and ended up going completely crazy.

Why did all three of them have to confess to me at once? Choose one? I've played games on Hard Mode, Nightmare Mode, and Completely Freaking Insane Mode, but this was just plain impossible!

"We believe it is time for you two to admit defeat." Petralka sounded frustrated, maybe because the bean-transferring wasn't going as well as she would have liked. "What, do you believe a half-elf and a werewolf can prevail against a human like us?"

"I do, Your Majesty. You can see I have better fine motor skills than you do."

"What?!"

"Please know that you won't be able to intimidate us with simple mind games."

"Grrrrr..."

"Y' ain't even managed one bean, Your Majesty. I've got *three* already!"

"Curse you...!"

O forbidden armor, truly to be feared. The girls were already almost like different people. To be fair, Petralka had never been the most patient person in the world. And the forbidden armor brought all your thoughts to the surface, making tempers even shorter. It also had a disconcerting tendency to convert the wearer's impulses immediately into action—including any nasty remarks you considered letting out of your mouth. I shouldn't have been surprised if the girls seemed a little prickly.

"Are we to simply endure a contest such as this?!" Petralka suddenly shouted, and then with a sweep of her arms she overturned the entire cart. The dishes went flying, scattering beans all over the ground.

"What are you doing, Your Majesty?!"

"Y' can't do that just 'cause y' aren't winning!"

"Bah! Hush, pipe down, be silent, *shut up*!" As the conversation got heated, Petralka lashed out with her arms again and smashed the cart to pieces. "This does not please us! We declare this contest invalid!"

Myusel and Elvia both looked at her in shock. The tension between them was off the charts. It was like a bomb about to blow. I felt that familiar bad feeling...

Simultaneously, all three of them took up fighting postures and launched into action.

I aimed an attack at Her Majesty, but she dodged easily. At the same time, I felt a blunt impact against the "arms" I had crossed in front of me, as if they had been hit by a giant, metal hammer. I managed to plant my two armored legs against the ground, but couldn't quite absorb the entire impact; I felt myself being shoved back, plowing up earth as I went.

"Hrgh..." I opened my eyes, which I had instinctively squeezed shut, and was presented with the sight of Her Majesty. Her right arm was extended, as if she had just thrown something, and she was leaning over, suggesting that the impact and reverberation I had felt was her hitting me with all her strength.

"Minor damage. Commencing na-no-ma-te-ri-al repair."

I heard that whisper inside my head again, but I couldn't pay attention to it now.

"Engaging hand-to-hand combat mode. Multipurpose field set to hand-

to-hand fighting mode allocation pat-tern. Defense, 55 per-cent; mobility, 35 per-cent; postural maintenance, 10 per-cent. Su-per-con-duc-tive-stor-age-bat-tery, low state of charge, mi-cro-gas-tur-bine-en-gines one and two commencing operation."

I didn't really follow what it was saying, but the forbidden armor clearly thought it was helping me fight. I could feel the "screen" surrounding my face and torso increase in thickness.

"Aren't you both lucky!" Her Majesty shouted at me and Elvia-san, giving us the glare of a lifetime. "Living in the same house as Shinichi! When you wake up, he is there! At meals, he eats with you! You talk to him freely! When you go to bed, he is still just a few rooms away! You can see him whenever you like! Talk to him whenever you wish!"

Majesty...

It was true that compared to us, Her Majesty had much less time to spend with Shinichi-sama. I was the first person he had met in this world, and she was the second, but Her Majesty probably didn't get to spend half as much time with Shinichi-sama as Elvia-san and I did, living in the same house as him.

Elvia-san took a flying leap at Her Majesty. The blow could have knocked over a tree or shattered a boulder—if it had landed. But even as Elvia-san reached out an arm, Her Majesty stepped neatly backward, just out of range.

"We are given to understand that you even 'accidentally' encounter him in the bath! We know that cliché from manga! Let us guess—did you also 'unintentionally' knock him over and set his heart to racing?! Does he not have many an opportunity for what they call '*lucky sukebe*'?!"

"So what if he does?!" Elvia-san demanded, pursuing Her Majesty. She had her right arm pulled back, her entire body turned like she was about to deliver a massive punch, but then she spun with her left hip, launching a kick diagonally from the ground. Her Majesty blocked this with an upraised arm, but I could see her lift slightly into the air, perhaps because of the difference in their weight.

"Shinichi-sama saved my *life*!" Elvia-san yelled, and grabbed onto Her Majesty's arm, trying to rip it off. An instant later she spun again, this time launching a reverse roundhouse with her left leg. Her Majesty dodged it, just.

"Hrrf?!"

But... what was that in Her Majesty's august face? A tail?

It was only a second, but it was enough. Her Majesty, partially blinded, was left open to Elvia-san's next move: she continued spinning, coming around with a back fist that finally landed. The spin, especially with both of Elvia-san's feet planted, gave it plenty of power, and this time Her Majesty went flying.

"There's one person who said they like my ears and tail! One person who acknowledged me as an artist—who said my pictures were good! Do you know how happy it made me t' hear that? And it was Shinichi-sama! I've never known anyone like him!"

Elvia-san...

I understood how she felt. I was painfully familiar with that feeling. My half-elf ears had been, for me, nothing but a source of shame, a reason for people to shun and revile me. But *he* had had nothing but praise for them. He had spoken up for me, a mere maid. He had taught me to read and write. Shinichi-sama had done all of it, without any regard for what he might get out of it. I had never met anyone like him before. The memories came flooding back to me. I knew this wasn't the time for such things, but...

"Eek?!" Her Majesty came tumbling toward me, and we rolled to the ground in a tangle. Thanks to the armor, it didn't hurt, but I could feel the impact all the way through me, shaking my brain.

"So I don't want—I don't want y'all to take Shinichi-sama from me!" Elvia-san shouted. "Y' can have anything you want, Your Majesty! All *you* have to do is ask for it! So don't take Shinichi-sama away from me!"

"That's... my line..." I said, getting up. "Even when Shinichi-sama saw my ears, found out I was a half-elf, he didn't recoil or get upset. He said they were 'moe'...!"

Humans were put off by my ears, of course, but even elves seemed to see them as not quite "Elvish." I was stuck in the middle, excluded from both groups. A pariah with no home. It was a burden I had borne since the day I was born, an inescapable fact put upon me by the gods. Shinichi-sama had really and truly changed my life.

I remembered the first day we met. When he had taught me Ja-panese. All the times he had enjoyed my cooking and told me how delicious it was. Just thinking about those things was enough to make my chest tight.

"Don't make us laugh," Her Majesty said, swaying on her feet. "Yes, we are the empress. We can have *almost* anything we want. But know this:

there are things we cannot have *because* we are the empress!”

That caught me by surprise. And then I remembered. Years ago, Her Majesty’s parents had died in a struggle for the succession with their siblings. If they hadn’t been of royal blood, there would never have been cause for such bitter enmity, and Her Majesty could be living happily with her mother and father even now. As she stood there biting her lip and looking at the ground, Her Majesty looked so much smaller than usual...

“You saw it, did you not?! You heard what happened! All the events with Zwelberich! We are not permitted to follow our heart even in the matter of whom we may love! No, even that must be subject to calculation and strategy! For us, there is no love without consideration of the costs and benefits!”

My feeling of shock redoubled; Elvia-san must have felt the same way, because we both took a long swallow. What Her Majesty was saying—it was true. Exactly because I was a have-not, I never had to doubt the truth of Shinichi-sama’s affection. In fact, that was what allowed me to humbly accept the many things he did for me. But as for Her Majesty...

“Shinichi is the only one! He is the only one who knew us as an empress, yet never wondered how he might gain from it! The only one who could exclaim ‘IS THAT ***REALLY*** AN ARCHETYPAL LITTLE-GIRL CHARACTER?!’ upon our first meeting... Rude though it was! But... That is— It is exactly—”

“Your Majesty...”

“You say we have everything? That we can obtain whatever we wish for? Yet we have no half-elf ears, no werewolf tail, for Shinichi to moon over! We have nothing to elicit his affections, to draw him to us—we are only a little human girl! And it’s—”

Her Majesty was truly bellowing now—were those flecks of spittle I saw flying from her lips? Elvia-san and I could only listen in silence.

“And it is the same with our chest! You with your large endowments have no inkling of how we feel!”

“But Your Majesty, you’re, like, ‘anorexically thin’ or whatever they said!” Elvia-san objected. “Just the minimum of meat on your bones! Shinichi-sama’s always sayin’ about how ‘small boobs are a big deal’ or something, too!”

“Shinichi may say what he wishes, but the testimony of his eyes when he stands with us all speaks to where his true interest lies!”

Well... that was true enough. I had often spotted him glancing at Elvia-san's very large chest. I have to admit, I had wondered sometimes if bigger was really better...

"And then you add to this your 'beast ears' and tail! All the things Shinichi likes, in one girl! It is unfair! Unfair, we say! It is not even a contest!"

"But ain't the same thing true about Myusel?!"

"Wha...?"

"Half-elves are, like, the rarest 'moe point' for Shinichi-sama or something, aren't they?!"

"W-Well..."

The elf population was simply smaller than that of the humans, and half-elves were even fewer in number than that, so I suppose you could say we were something rare...

"That is true—Myusel, you have an unfair advantage as well!" I suddenly found myself the object of Her Majesty's attack. "Not only do you fit Shinichi's tastes, but you have 'captured his stomach' with that delicious cooking of yours!"

"Yeah, 's right! Your cooking really *is* delicious!"

"Gosh, I don't..."

"From the beginning, he has said nothing but Myusel, Myusel, Myusel! Do you have some kind of contract to receive a piece of gold every time somebody says your name?!"

"B-But at home, he's always talking about *you*, Your Majesty!" I shot back, remembering many dinner conversations. "He's forever worrying about you and fretting about you—do you have any idea how it hurts to have to see Shinichi-sama like that day after day?!"

"Of course we do not! But tell us, is that true?!"

"Why else would he have come up with a whole song and dance about creating a puppet body double for you?!"

"Hrr—!"

.....And so on. When we weren't attacking each other with our fists, we were doing it with our words. But we still couldn't settle who was Shinichi-sama's "one and only," the most special person to him. So we resented those who had what we didn't, burned with jealousy towards them, complained about the advantages of the other two, grieving, as if it would somehow let us finally claim Shinichi-sama's feelings.

"Significant possibility for mission goals to be accomplished by elimination of obstacles," someone whispered to me. I had to think Her Majesty and Elvia-san were hearing the same thing.

I didn't even understand what I was doing anymore. I didn't know if it was me talking, or someone else. But this much I knew: the words came from me.

"Argh, this will never end!" Her Majesty shouted, and took up a fighting posture.

Elvia-san and I started to move at the same moment.

Bad, bad, bad. I knew things would end up like this.

I dashed into the mansion, groaning to myself as I ran down the hall.

"Huff... Puff..."

I didn't have a moment to lose. Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia were going at it again in the front yard, for real. Kicking, punching, throwing. You'd never normally see a fight this outrageous outside of an anime or manga. I could see it through the windows as I ran past. If a mere flesh-and-blood human tried to get in the middle of all that, they would be killed instantly. That left Minori-san and Hikaru-san unable to do anything but watch.

But what about me? What should I do? Could I just stand there, chewing my fingernails?

"No, I've got to... I've got to do something... But...!"

I understood. I knew that deep down, the real reason those girls were fighting was me. Yes, the "forbidden armor" had exacerbated and enabled this, but the real source of their growing frustration was my own dithering attitude. The girls got along so well superficially that I had taken the situation for granted, not fully recognizing how they really felt. So now it was on me to do something about this. But...

Like Minori-san and Hikaru-san said, the simplest and most certain solution would be to just pick one of them. Not necessarily, like, get married to them immediately, but at least declare my love to someone—Myusel, Petralka, or Elvia. Then they would have no more reason to fight. Then they could get the armor off—probably. I hoped.

Yet, pathetically, even at this moment, I just wasn't capable of picking any one of them. Or to put it another way, I couldn't shoot down two of

them. I remembered all too clearly what it had felt like when I got rejected.

You're not needed, it had said to me. *You're worthless. Were you so presumptuous as to think that I would want to have anything to do with you for even an instant?*

"Anyway...!" I said, diving into my office. The clean, simple solution of picking one of the girls was out. Then I just wouldn't pick anyone right now. I couldn't force myself. There was some advice I had given to Petralka once: it's not good to ignore your problems, but you'll always regret a rushed decision.

So what to do?

I would have to stop them with force. And if I didn't have the strength on my own, I would have to borrow some from somewhere. Even if it was somewhere "cursed."

"Nothing ventured—!"

There were still two boxes in my office, containing two more suits of forbidden armor. I opened the lids; they both looked about the same to me. Like gloves and greaves and other bits of armor all rolled up into a big ball.

But still—they only looked *about* the same. Close inspection revealed subtly different designs. According to Garius, it was the same with the armor Myusel and the others had put on: functionally similar, but perhaps not identical; we weren't sure yet. For one thing, the color schemes were different, Myusel's blue, Petralka's white, and Elvia's red.

Ever since this whole thing had started, though, one question had nagged at me. Why only girls? Even if these were just prototypes, it would make sense to have one that worked for guys. Or what if there *had* been suits for guys, but it just so happened that the one that went nuts in the past belonged to a girl?

The reality was, I hadn't tested for myself to see if they really didn't work on guys. Maybe one of these other two would react if I touched it. So I steeled myself, reached out, and put a hand on one of the remaining suits...

(*screechy violin crescendo*)

And... nothing happened. I waited. Myusel and the others had said the armor reacted the moment they touched it, basically swallowing them up. But this one didn't do anything. Strike.

But there was one left...

I touched it, waited a moment, but still nothing. Maybe they were both duds.

“Gah, work, dammit, work! Do something! This is an emergency, we’re done for if you don’t move! I never knew magical armor could be so *fussy*...!” I pounded my fist against the armor. And that’s when it happened.

There was a sort of *shloop* sound, I thought.

“Hrgh?!”

The globe split open, and suddenly a series of bits and pieces were attaching themselves to me, first from my fist to my elbow, then from my elbow to my shoulder, climbing up along my arm. Like a snake, or a swarm of bugs, parts made of metal and polymers attached themselves to my body, defying gravity to reach me. Then they started covering my lower half, too.

The clothes I was wearing disappeared, schlepped away somewhere, replaced by a perfectly form-fitting black suit that covered me from the neck down. Was it my imagination, or did I feel something like static electricity run along my skin? And then...

“E—Eyowowowow!” I exclaimed. “Ouch, that hurts, what the heck!”

To be more precise, it was my thighs that hurt—or to be even *more* precise, the thing between them, on which a very uncomfortable pressure was being exerted!

I heard a voice in my head: *"This unit is for female use."*

"Guh?!"

I didn't recognize the voice. There was no one around, and strangest of all, the voice didn't seem to get to me by vibrating my eardrums. It was like it was reverberating right inside my head. Like telepathy, or if I had suddenly become one of those "*denpa*" people who claimed to receive mysterious transmissions directly into their minds. But...

"Could that be... the forbidden armor talking...?"

I knew magic made it totally possible to communicate directly with someone's mind. I did it every day using my interpreter ring.

"Operation by males is recommended only in emergency situations. As an emergency has been asserted, restriction to female-only use has been lifted. Some functions may be unavailable. Please operate carefully."

"Wh-What's going on here...?"

"Detailed information requested. Mechanisms related to biological functions: system for disposal of biological excretions malfunctioning. A female excretion-disposal system is fitted to this unit, and is exerting pressure on the male organs."

".....You mean..."

"Determination: no concern at this size."

".....Uh, so you're saying..."

"It is not nearly big enough to cause a problem."

"Lay off already!" I wailed.

So I knew for sure now that this forbidden armor was intended for a woman to use, but because I had insisted it was an emergency, it had managed to adapt itself to me by disabling a few specific systems. And the pain between my legs was because, uh, you know, the toilet or whatever—it was adapted for women, who lacked... certain things a man had.

"O.....Okay... N-Now I can... help Myusel and the others...!" Still uncomfortably focused on my tenders, I rushed out of my office to break up the fight in the front yard.

Without warning, something came bursting into the middle of our battle. A humanoid form that seemed to crash down out of the sky. The "arm" with which I had lashed out, the similar strike from Her Majesty, and

even the leg Elvia-san had thrown up in a kick were all stopped by the figure with a screeching sound of metal. It used both its arms and lifted a leg as well. Almost like an acrobat performing a trick.

And finally...

“Wha...?” I blinked in amazement. The figure—it looked just like us. Someone wearing forbidden armor. It hung off them like a massive puppet, with broad shoulders leading to gigantic arms, and metal legs ensconcing the lower half of the wearer’s body.

And just like us, there was someone inside the armor, their body standing exposed except for a form-fitting suit. It was a boy.

“Shinichi... sama...?”

It was Shinichi-sama.

I took an instinctive step back. Her Majesty lowered her arm as well, and Elvia-san put her foot back on the ground, staring in astonishment. I understood her incredulity: how could Shinichi-sama be wearing armor that was supposed to be only for women?

“Wh... Why...?”

The question came unbidden to my lips. I didn’t know if it meant “Why were you able to put on the armor?” or “Why are you interfering in our battle?”

“Stop... Please, stop...” Shinichi-sama said, the very image of seriousness. “I’m begging you to... stop...” He looked nearly... pitiful. I felt a tightening in my chest—but...

“Shinichi, why do you stop us?!”

“Yeah, what’s goin’ on?!”

“Please don’t get in our way!”

Her Majesty, Elvia-san, and even I exclaimed almost simultaneously. I can’t quite say it was in spite of myself. Yes, it hurt me to see Shinichi-sama looking so sad—or at least part of me. But there was also a part of me that was annoyed to be interrupted.

In the end, this “forbidden armor” was me myself. Another me that I had within. One that I would never normally reveal; one that was mean and selfish but also very sure of what she wanted. The forbidden armor simply brought her to the surface.

Then I flinched, because Her Majesty and Elvia-san had begun to move. They were coming around Shinichi-sama from either side, presumably to launch a concerted attack against me. Caught between them,

it would be difficult for me to react. I went to push Shinichi-sama aside so I could deal with Elvia-san...

“Eek?!

But instead, I found myself being pulled forward; someone had a grip on my arm. The world seemed to spin. Then I realized I was standing behind Shinichi-sama. He had moved to put his back to me, protecting me. I could see him through the suit, through a spot with no armor and no supports, and he had never looked so heroic.

He raised his arms and intercepted the blows from Her Majesty and Elvia-san.

“Shinichi-sama...” I felt something hot welling up inside my chest. He had protected me. He had kept me safe.

Me.

“Why do you protect *Myusel*?!”

“Yeah, no fair, you’re always takin’ her side!”

But Shinichi-sama responded, “You’re wrong!”

“What are we wrong about?!”

“It’s no fair, no fair!”

Her Majesty and Elvia-san attacked Shinichi-sama mercilessly—or perhaps I should say, they tried to attack *me*, but he was in the way. He deflected every blow. Of course, it was possible in part because we were all wearing forbidden armor. But it was the first time I had ever seen Shinichi-sama fight, not with magic, but with his own hands, and it was inspiring. I could only watch him in awe.

“Petralka! Elvia!” Shinichi-sama called out. That was all, but at the gravity in his voice the others slowed their attacks as if it had had a physical effect on them. In fact, just for an instant, they froze entirely.

Shinichi-sama took advantage of it, spreading his arms wide and... embracing them, armor and all.

Yes, they were all covered with the forbidden armor, which enveloped their arms and shoulders—but somewhere between the two, a bit of their own bodies was exposed, and Shinichi-sama was able to touch Her Majesty and Elvia-san himself.

“Wha—Shin—?!”

“Shini... sama...?!”

I was shocked, too, maybe even more than they were, for I found I could say no words at all. Armor or no armor, I thought this might be the

first time Shinichi-sama had hugged either of them.

When Shinichi-sama was sure that the two of them were still, he gradually released them. He took a step back and straightened up.

Maybe that had been his plan all along, to stop them with a hug.

“I’m not protecting just one of you. I’m not taking sides. I just... I just don’t want any of you to be hurt!” Shinichi-sama said, and he had never sounded more truthful.

He looked at Her Majesty, then at Elvia-san, and finally he turned to me. On his face was a look of utmost seriousness. The heat I felt inside me burned hotter when I saw it.

Of course. I should have known. *Had* known. Shinichi-sama, kind and gentle as he was, would never have wanted us to fight. It could only have hurt him to see it. It was exactly that quality that drew me—drew us—to him so strongly.

We had been forgetting that. We had tried to win Shinichi-sama’s affections by fighting for them, but we had it backwards...

“Shinichi-sama...!”

Ahh! To know someone could be so kind! My vision blurred and I felt a prickling in my nose. Overwhelmed by emotion, I discovered I was flinging myself at Shinichi-sama’s chest. I thought the transparent “screens” that protected our torsos might collide, but to my surprise, there was no sound or feeling of impact; instead it was like water had been pressed against water.

“Shinichi-sama...” I could feel his body heat, dimly. His body was by no means sculpted like that of a knight or soldier who spent his days training, yet it was firmer than my woman’s form, more manly. It felt wonderful, reassuring. I wanted to stay this way forever. Even if I could hardly believe I was thinking that...

“Myus—”

Shinichi-sama’s voice sounded somewhat strained. At the same moment...

“Sexual excitement detected. Registering rapid expansion of male organ. This is producing interference with operations support functions. Initiating emergency functions...”

“Huh...?”

That was the forbidden armor I heard. After listening to it so many times, I was slowly becoming accustomed to its strange turns of phrase. But I didn’t think the voice I was hearing was coming from *my* armor. Because

of the way we were touching, I suspected the voice of Shinichi-sama's armor was being communicated to me. The words, which sounded very much like Ja-panese, came to me at almost the same moment as their meaning, overlapping directly in my head.

Excitement? Organ? Expansion? Wait—did that mean...?

"L-Look, don't get the wrong i-idea..." Shinichi-sama said with a hurried shake of his head. "I just..." He backed away quickly, and our "screens" returned to normal. "It's just instinctive, okay?! It's totally natural!"

"Wha...?" Her Majesty, Elvia-san, and I all blinked to hear Shinichi-sama's tone change so suddenly. Was that...?

"Huh?! No, that isn't—*not* what I meant! Myusel's pillow-soft boobs pressed right up against me like that! How could my @&$! *not* 'expand'?!"

"Shi-Shinichi-sama...?"

"No! I didn't mean to say that! Heck, it's Elvia's fault for having that luscious, overflowing chest right out there in front of me!"

"...Buh?" Elvia-san's eyes went round.

"No, no! Petralka's tiny, totally jiggle-free rack is moe, too! What I wouldn't give to just cup that in my hand and $&! the &**@ out of it before I *!$# my **$ in there and..."

"Wha—?" Her Majesty's mouth just hung open.

"Noooooooo I don't even *mean* that!" Shinichi-sama wailed, clutching his head.

And then we realized: the forbidden armor had a way of bringing out what was deep inside a person, feelings they wouldn't admit to or didn't even know were there. Meaning... everything Shinichi-sama had said just now...

"Myusel is adorable! But Elvia's boobs are outta control, and that's great too, but so is Petralka's complete smoothness! I can't choose! And I like you all and you're all welcome to like me but having you fight like this is a huge pain in the ahhhhh that's not what I mean! I don't mean any of it! I don't want to say any of that, shut up!"

As Shinichi-sama yelped and howled, the three of us could only watch him in silence.

"Choose one? My ass! Sometimes you want Chinese food, and sometimes a nice cheeseburger's what does it for you, and other days it's a little sukiyaki! It's important to keep your options open—hell, I'd like to get

with all these chicks for a long time yet! N-No, I don't mean—ahhhh!"

"....."

"....."

"....."

Elvia-san, Her Majesty, and I all looked at each other. The fever, as they say, had broken. Her Majesty and Elvia-san both looked implacably serious. I can only assume I seemed the same. I believe the Ja-panese otaku had a word for this phenomenon. What was it?

Oh yes. *Don-biki.* To be completely put off by someone. And...

"Shinichi-kun?" I heard someone call. I turned to see Minori-sama and Hikaru-sama approaching.

"Oh! M-Minori-san, help me! M-My mouth, it's just talking on its own! And I can't get my body to move!"

"Ahh... Hm." Minori-sama had a somewhat inscrutable expression on her face. It was almost a look of pity, like one might give to an upset child one didn't want to get too close to. Beside her, Hikaru-sama just looked exasperated.

"That's because it's built for women," he said. "You aren't even supposed to be able to put it on, but since you did anyway, it's probably caused all sorts of errors."

Minori-sama turned to the rest of us. "Anyway, Myusel, Elvia. Now that you've been completely put off by Shinichi-kun and cooled down, listen to me for a moment. I know you've been fighting over him, but even if one of you somehow won this battle, that wouldn't automatically make you Shinichi-kun's 'number one.' You know that, don't you?"

There was nothing we could say to that. When she put it that way, it was obvious enough. If anything...

"If anything, I know Shinichi-kun should have just picked one of you to begin with, and then we could have avoided this whole mess."

"Yeah, I hate seeing carnage like this, but having a bunch of girls fight over me, it's pretty moe by definition, you know? This 'forbidden armor' is already hot-looking enough on you girls, but when you start going at it, it's like, *mrrow!* A whole new level of hot. What if instead of punching each other, you were using, like, joint locks and stuff, so you got pressed up against each other, and then maybe Elvia's boobs and Petralka's boobs would be like *squoosh!* up against each other, and man, what I wouldn't give to be right in between them, just thinking about it makes the blood rush

to my $#@! ... is *not what I really mean!* Arrrgh, somebody stop meeee!"

"Shinichi..."

To my surprise, it was Her Majesty who took a step forward.

"Huh? What? Petral...ka...?" Maybe he could feel that something was different, uncalm. Shinichi-sama just frowned.

"We shall stop you," Her Majesty said. She was smiling. But I could see, at the edges of her august face, her honored cheeks twitching.

An instant later, the "arm" of Her Highness's armor launched itself at Shinichi-sama's face.

"Hrfh?!"

Of course, there was a screen there, so she wasn't going to actually hit Shinichi-sama. Nonetheless, he leaned away—but his hands and feet were still frozen to the spot, and like a puppet collapsing, he went down with a thump. Obviously, he had no chance to catch himself.

"If it breaks, we believe you will stop," she said.

"Uh...?"

"There are no finger holds or the like to allow us to tear it off of you, so we believe the process will consist of beating you mercilessly until something breaks and a vulnerability appears. Though the armor itself may be destroyed in the process. We suspect."

"Hey... Wait..."

"Let me help, Y'r Majesty!"

"Mm. We would welcome it."

Her Majesty and Elvia-san climbed on top of the fallen Shinichi-sama.

"Wait, hold on, you're gonna break it! You're gonna break it *and* me! Ow, ow, ow! M—Myu—!"

As the other two pounded on him in every way they could think of, Shinichi-sama looked desperately at me.

Ahh. My poor Shinichi-sama. I'll help you—

"Your Majesty. Allow me to help you." I discovered my mouth saying. "Shinichi-sama, just hang in there for a few minutes."

"Wha? What? Noooooo!"

For a while, Minori-sama and Hikaru-sama watched him shake his head furiously behind the transparent screen. Finally, Minori-sama advised, "Try not to kill him, okay?" Then she and Hikaru-sama went and sat on a bench in the garden, apparently to watch.

"Ah, not there! That's off limits! Ahh! Ow! Minori-sa—! H-Hikaru-

san, you too?! Somebody help meeeee!”

And so, with Minori-sama’s blessing, we swarmed Shinichi-sama and set about the work of pounding his forbidden armor to scrap.

The dust finally settled.

Once the girls had lost interest in “winning” me, they no longer viewed each other as “interference,” and the forbidden armors popped off face-palmingly quick. They returned to their original spherical shapes, Lauron and Romilda’s dad returned the spheres to a set of newly built boxes—with chains on them this time—and they were deposited back in the castle storehouse.

Then there was the one I had been wearing, which Petralka, as good as her word, had broken apart. It went in its box still smashed. It didn’t look like it was ever going to function again, but we figured you couldn’t be too careful. I wondered when, or if, the forbidden armor would ever see the light of day again. Personally, I thought they could just stay in that storage room until the end of the world. They had really caused me a lot of trouble.

So there I was...

“Shinichi-sama, how are you feeling?”

“Shinichi, say something. We can get you anything you like.”

“Shinichi-sama, I’ll draw y’ a picture so you won’t get bored, any picture at all!”

I was curled up in bed, the sheets pulled over my head, my bed surrounded by three girls. Myusel. Petralka. And Elvia. All three of them seemingly enjoying themselves.

But as for me, I didn’t say a word. Feelings-wise, I was like a newbie adventurer down in some dungeon who had run into a monster that was way too powerful for him, and was trying to guts it out. If I made any sound, if I so much as moved, it would notice me.

“You think he’s asleep?”

“Sure looks that way.”

“Then perhaps we shouldn’t bother him...”

With that, I felt the three of them getting farther away.

“Ah, Myusel. Our tiny stomach is empty. Make us something.”

“Yeah, I’m hungry, too!”

“Of course, what would you like me to make?”

“Some kinda sweet treat!”

“This would be a nice opportunity to take some tea in the garden.”

“I’ll get everything ready, then.”

The voices, and accompanying footsteps, receded down the hallway. Somehow the girls seemed even closer than they had before. Even after I couldn’t hear them anymore, I stayed under the covers, counting to a hundred, just to be safe. Finally—

“Phew!” I poked my head out. Operation: Pretend to be Asleep had been a success.

Just as I was sitting up with a sigh of relief, though:

“Look who’s afraid of women now.” I twitched. The voice sounded faintly amused. I looked over and saw Minori-san standing in the doorway Myusel and the others had just left through, smirking at me. “Not even going to let them see your face? Her Majesty especially—I’m sure she has to argue with Garius-san every time she wants to come over here.”

“Yeah, well... Yeah. You’re right.” I heaved a sigh.

“’Course, I guess if *I* had been turned into a punching bag by a bunch of girls who had been arguing about who loved me the most until a moment before, I’d probably be scared of women, too.” She shrugged and came into the room. “Then again... ever heard the expression *you reap what you sow*?”

“...Uh-huh. And I don’t have a response to it.” I hung my head, thoroughly chastised.

Incidentally, I was currently unable to walk around freely. Every muscle in my body ached—not because of the pounding, but, I suspected, because of how I had basically tried to act like a Hollywood action star while wearing the forbidden armor. Oh, and I did also have, like, three dozen bruises. Between wet compresses and the bandages wrapped all over, I pretty much looked like a mummy from the neck down. These were all wounds I’d sustained when Myusel and the others ripped the forbidden armor off me.

You know, I think a few of those punches were “just for good measure”... Still, I understood perfectly well that I was in no position to complain.

“Turns out it’s tough to have a harem in real life,” Minori-san teased.

“I don’t have a harem.”

At least, I didn’t mean *to.*

“Oh! So you’ve picked one of them, then?”

“Hoo hoo hoo,” I laughed, more than a little desperately. “Of course I... haven’t.”

“Ah.” Minori-san, staring down at me from behind her glasses, stopped at the foot of my bed. “Anyway, I guess all’s well that ends well, at least for Myusel and her friends.”

She was right about that. As the conversation earlier had suggested, Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia were better friends now than they had been even before they put on that armor. There had been a certain distance between Petralka and Elvia in particular—maybe that was only natural when one of you was an empress and the other was a former spy from an enemy nation—but now they seemed happy as clams together.

“I guess those who fight together, stay together,” I said.

“You don’t think it’s just because they have a common enemy now?” Minori-san replied.

“Common enemy?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Do they? Who is it?”

Long pause. Big grin. A finger pointing toward my face.

.....Uh, well, I definitely did get beaten up by all three of them together! Hey, isn’t Minori-san supposed to be my bodyguard? Where was she when I needed help? It was a little late to be worrying about that, though.

“Okay, that’s a joke, sort of. But maybe it’s a good thing that the forbidden armor got everyone’s real feelings out in the open. Cleared the air, so to speak. Helped everyone say the things they could never say before. It’s not like you all hated each other. And nothing deepens a friendship like honesty, right?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right...”

When we had put the suits back in their boxes, Garius, among others, had suggested the possibility of putting a more definitive end to them—dumping them in the sea or throwing them into a volcano, for instance. The person who put a stop to that idea was one of the very victims of the armor—Petralka. Garius had discreetly informed me as much when he came to visit me at my sickbed yesterday. The logic, he claimed, was that it was the forbidden armor that had allowed Petralka to get closer to Myusel and Elvia, so it hadn’t been all bad. As such, she wanted it to be retained at the

castle for the time being rather than thrown away.

"I'm curious what the heck those things actually *are*, though."

Straight-up power armor that looked like it had walked out of an SF series someplace? A voice in your head when you wore it that sounded like onboard AI? The voice seemed to function a bit like the magic interpreter rings, but it sounded less like there was some sort of spirit stuck in the machine than as if it were the machine itself that was talking.

With these thoughts in my head, I looked over at Minori-san... She didn't say anything, but she looked uncommonly serious.

"Minori-san?"

"Huh? Yes?" She blinked like she was waking up from a dream.

"Something the matter?

"What would be the matter?"

"I don't know. You just looked like you were thinking really hard."

"Oh..... Yeah, I guess." She nodded, but her expression was ambiguous. "Shinichi-kun, did you get a good look at the forbidden armor when it was still in its box?"

"Huh? Not really. When I put mine on, I was too busy freaking out."

"Mm. Okay, then do you remember Garius-san mentioning that it looked like there were some Japanese characters on the armor?"

".....Oh."

Come to think of it, he had said something like that, hadn't he? That was the whole reason he had brought the armor to our place to begin with. So-called letters or characters are really just symbols; people in two different worlds could have come up with similar looking systems by chance. It wouldn't be that surprising. So I hadn't given a lot of thought to the hypothesis that the writing was Japanese.

"I took a few pictures," Minori-san said, and produced her phone. "The characters are too faded to read for the most part, but they definitely do look sort of... earthly."

I blinked and waited for her to say something else. What was she suggesting? The forbidden armor was ancient, and it came from *this* world. But it had characters on it that looked like they came from ours. The armor looked and acted like something out of a sci-fi story. So...

"W-Well, I'm probably just imagining things," Minori-san said.

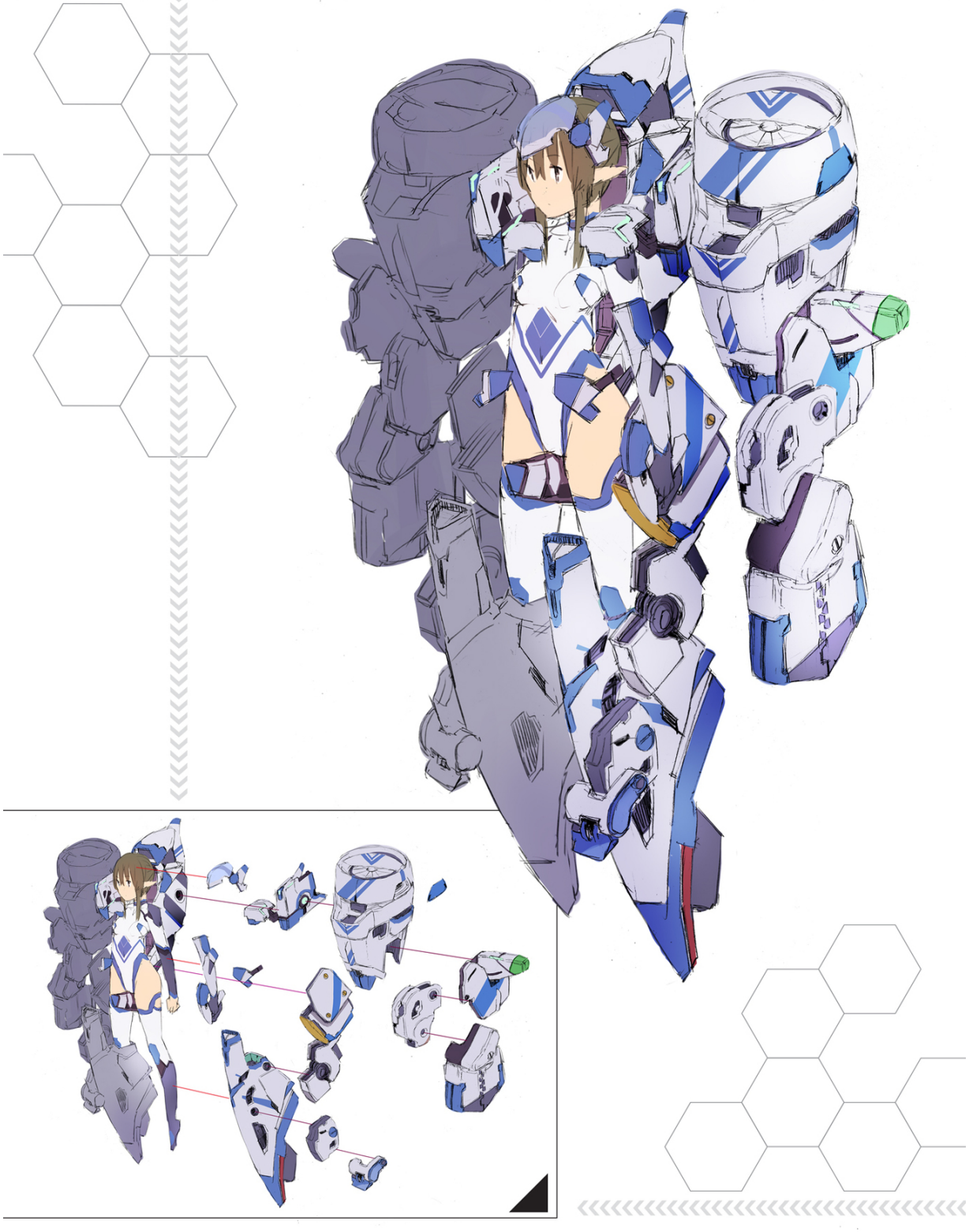
"Y-Yeah," I agreed. "Probably."

Minori-san and I deliberately ignored the conclusion forming in our

minds. Instead, we smiled at each other. Weakly.

(□□□)

To be continued...



PDWS X03AD-F Iron Crab F

Height: 190-220 cm (unfolded)
Width: 128 cm
Weight: 89,000 g
Power Source: Variable hybrid system (micro gas turbine engine + superconductive battery—power source selection automatic by situation)
Armament: Extending Claw Hands (2)
2.3 mm Reflective Lasers (2) (Launch port may be set via multipurpose field)
Defense: Multipurpose field (variable)
Material: Stainless steel, plastic-based nanomaterials, metallic nanomaterials, etc.

A personal defense weapon system (PDWS) created at the behest of the national defense agency. To the bitter end, the Iron Crab was in danger of being beat out by the X-05 “Shell Person,” another PDWS concept. However, revelations of embezzlement by people involved with the PDWS competition itself, along with manifest operational-level problems at the prototyping stage, led to the indefinite suspension of the entire PDWS development program.

Records indicate that twelve prototype units were prepared including spares, to allow testing at the squadron level, the smallest operational unit.

PDWS were initially developed not as weapons for soldiers in the field, but as survival tools for civilians who might have to protect the home front in the event of total war. They were envisioned as serving users who had not received combat training.

To enable the wearer to survive even in environments where bio-contaminant weapons have been deployed, there is an airtight multipurpose field, along with a semi-autonomous AI. The PDWS may be considered a tiny, mobile shelter.

This model is designated F for female, indicating it is for use by

women; the presence of biological-waste removal systems necessitated separate models for men and women. Most of the components of the two units are identical, so that in emergency mode (indicated for temporary use), a male may use an F model.

The unit is expected to be stored in a private residence, and so is designed to fold into a compact form for storage, light enough that a single person can lift it if need be. Built to be light despite apparent toughness, the construction includes extensive use of self-repairing nano-polymers.

Defensive capabilities are provided primarily by the multipurpose field, rather than by actual armor. The field does not simply provide defense, but is a support structure for the entire unit, helping to enable its movement. Hence, despite its relatively small contact surface area, the Iron Crab is both highly mobile and completely stable.

Further, to enable continued survival where procurement of supplies may be impossible, the unit is not equipped with fixed weapons utilizing consumable ammunition, but rather mounts lasers and variable-form anchor mechanisms for mid- to long-range combat.

The two “arms” conceal work manipulators that could in principle be used to operate virtually any extant weapon (based on mode selection and thought control, the arms may operate independently from wearer’s arms); however, the mechanisms are intended primarily to facilitate heavy labor for rescue or transport, and the claws themselves are recommended if the arms must be used as a weapon.

Afterword

Hullo, light novelist Sakaki here, bringing you Volume 13 of *Outbreak Company: The Power of Moe*.

.....

Mecha girls, amirite? That contrast between soft skin and hard metal. The armor is supposedly there to protect her, and yet it's as if she's bound by the metal, and it only makes the girl herself look even softer! Wonderful, right?! (Note: the opinions of the author represent only those of a single, trash human being.)

...Uh, I think I wrote something similar in the afterword to another magazine from a company that shall not be named, but I swear I'm not obsessed with this or anything. I mean, I've always liked mecha girls, but I was never blessed with an excuse to do a story about them (grin).

You do light novels for fifteen years, and then you realize the trends have taken a decisive turn away from you.

I never imagined at first that *Outbreak Company* would be my chance to do a mecha/armored girls storyline, but as a hallowed otaku genre, maybe it was only a matter of time until they showed up. We did already have a transformer in these pages, after all. (I'm talking about the Faldra.)

So anyway, this volume ended up being about mecha girls, or armored girls if you like, and they turned out to have a real battle. You know. War is hell.

I guess in a harem comedy, where the whole point is to have a bunch of beautiful girls surrounding the MC, a battle like this is technically forbidden (if you will), but even I, the very author of the series, was starting to get pretty tired of Shinichi's obliviousness, so I decided to allow this.

By the way, I worked in some subtle foreshadowing (or maybe not-so-subtle, if you're alert to these sorts of things), so I'm very curious how my readers will react.

I'm thinking the next volume is finally time for that short story

collection, before we get properly started on the final phase of the series, but, well... let's see what happens. Hope to catch you in the next volume!

Ichiro Sakaki
1 Jun 2015

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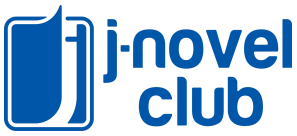

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Outbreak Company: Volume 13
by Ichiro Sakaki

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Edited by Sasha McGlynn

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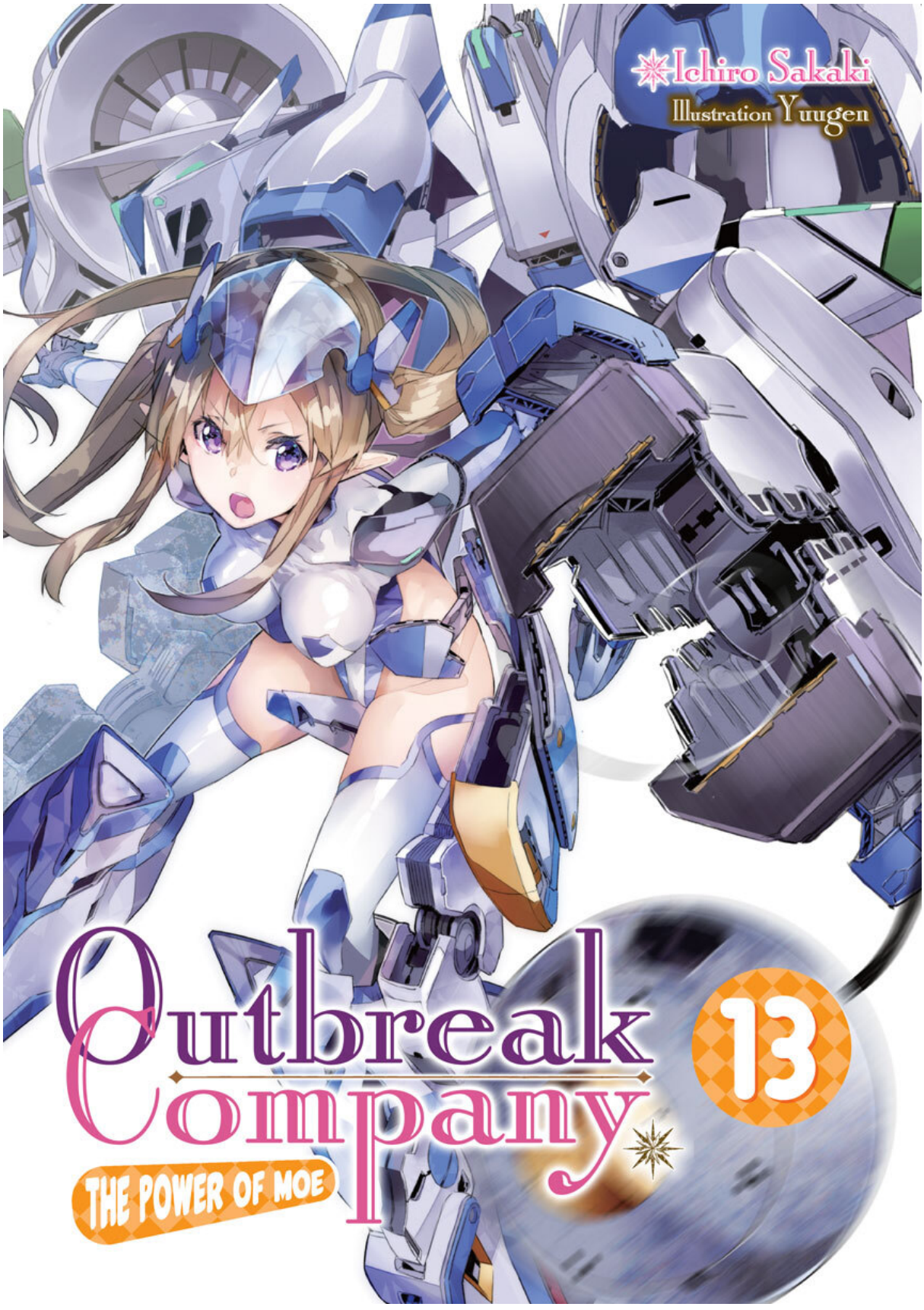
Ebook edition 1.0: March 2020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